The KHAKI GIRLS at WINDSOR BARRACKS

By

EDNA BROOKS

200

AS IF THEY HAD JUST DROPPED IN THE TWO KHAKI GIRLS ADVANCED.

The Khaki Girls at Windsor Barracks. Page 158

KHAKI GIRLS AT WINDSOR BARRACKS

OR

'Standing To' with the Trusty Twenty

By EDNA BROOKS

Author of "The Khaki Girls of the Motor Corps," "The Khaki Girls Behind the Lines," etc.

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THE KHAKI GIRLS SERIES

By EDNA BROOKS

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THE KHAKI GIRLS OF THE MOTOR CORPS
or Finding Their Place in the Big War

THE KHAKI GIRLS BEHIND THE LINES
or Driving With the Ambulance Corps

THE KHAKI GIRLS AT WINDSOR BARRACKS
or "Standing To" With the Trusty Twenty

Other Volumes in Preparation

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THE KHAKI GIRLS AT WINDSOR BARRACKS

CHAPTER I

THE AIR RAID

"MERCY! Is it all over? I know the shouting is, for I attended to that. Did I break the rules?"

"The rules went into smithereens along with my helmet. But I'm glad I seem to have a jaw left. I notice I get along pretty well with my gabbing apparatus. What is your very worst trouble?"

"Wrist, but it's my left. Feet O. K.," she tried them. "Right hand movable," she tried that. "But this little handle—" she held the left with the right, "this is somewhat out of true."

"The planes are gone, and I guess we can stretch out now. Girlie, I thought our turn had come."

"So did I, but I fancied we could not even get a turn. It all came in such a heap. I do believe if you or I had gone West that time, we would have passed in on the same ticket. I did not even breathe for myself."

"It must be always that way with the boys. Bunkie, we are going to have a very busy time. Let's look."

This conversation, if the scattered words, uttered between hard breathing, and gasps of exclamations could be called conversation, took place in a little French town near the lines, and the speakers were the Motor Corps girls, Joan Mason and Valerie Warde. An air raid had just passed over, and the girls, who had been making their way with their ambulance to the front, were now crawling out from their hiding place, under their own car. The car itself had been hit with some of the flying stuff, tossed up from everywhere, out of nowhere, getting somewhere with its damage. That somewhere was all around the ambulance.

Strength of will, and might of character, developed with their fine training, seemed to possess the girls now, so that they barely thought of their narrow escape, or their own troubles. It was duty, and the boys, and the people in the little town—all this concerned them. Also it was their precious ambulance. Would that "stand to" with them? Was the damage only on the surface, and could the girls use the ma-

chine in spite of the apparent wreck of the roof?

To get acquainted with the girls "meet them" in the first volume of this series "The Khaki Girls of the Motor Corps." Here is told how two of America's best little women, withdrew from everything attractive at home, not excluding the very worthiest war work, that they might "get across," and do full time service on the fields of France. In the second volume "The Khaki Girls Behind the Lines," the really marvelous exploits of the girls include such experiences as could not have been accurately put down in a book of girls' adventures before the war gave the new and remarkable opportunities. Stirring, thrilling, exciting, and at the same time all things that have happened—such are the stories of the first and second books of this series.

The Princess of the Crossroads, that woman in the last volume, who, under pretense of helping at a cross roads was really in the service of the enemy, is a character we must know against our wills. It was she who had threatened Joan, and who had wrought such mischief and even horrible deeds in our lines while succeeding in eluding the cleverest military detectives. But Joan ran her down What a desperate time our little Motor girls had with this enemy we have not forgotten, for while all the rest of the spy band were captured the Prin-

cess got away, and sent a threat back to Joan.

To have such a dangerously clever woman still living somewhere, whether within or near the American forces, was not a desirable situation, and our Invincible Girls felt she would again make herself known in some wicked way. Each time a new plot was unearthed they thought to find her hand hidden behind it, and in this they were not to be long mistaken.

The letter this princess wrote Joan had been kept for further evidence. Its sinister shadows would now and then cross the paths of the girls, but as they met these shadows they fought them, right always conquering finally.

It was almost a year since the girls put on the Khaki. This included that eventful period in American history which can never be repeated. Nor does history of the past boast a page to compare with it.

In spite of this new vigorous, and even perilous life, however, we find the girls not less attractive after their probation and its hardships.

On the contrary they are more finely developed and even better fitted to do the world's work they have chosen. Joan Mason's blond head has not suffered, apparently, from lack of attention. Her bright cheeks glow like the autumn flowers along the roadside, and her eyes are as blue as the skies that no war can hide.

Her chum, Valerie Warde, opposite in type, dark, tall, handsome, with all the attractive at-

tributes that such a description carries in the way of detail; she, too, has improved in personality with the life of a motor girl in action. True, the fastidious might object to certain discrepancies in the way of dress, for even the uniforms will show wear and tear; but to those who look at actual values, these changes indicate service, stand for D. S. C. and the very braid ripped from Joan's sleeve afforded her "citation cord."

The raid had passed and the girls had just pulled through with their lives. Their appearance also gave evidences of battle, in fact, Joan's blouse would not stand much more and have a claim on the name. It would soon be classed as tatters.

"The car, what an awful bang it got," Valerie was saying. "I wonder if the works are all right. Let's look."

"And let's pray?" suggested Joan, half in fooling but wholly in earnest. "What ever will we do if we can't travel now? I can scarcely wait to tear over the road. It seems to me Fritz did that with suicidal intent. Did you see how quickly our boys got them? We may even meet our assailants some day. Those fellows just gave up. Looking for an excuse at that." She had climbed into the ambulance and pressed her foot on the starter. The motor whirred and the engine throbbed, and general action was assured.

"Wonderful," exclaimed Valerie. "Everything as we left it. I think this car is bewitched, or whatever you call 'favored of the gods.'"

"You mean be-angeled. Witches could never do for the car what has been done in keeping it safe. Even the roof will stand up under a few props. But look, Val!" she pointed ahead. "See that mountain of men rolling over the line? We will find many left in the tracks. All ready to start?"

"All ready," answered the other. "We won't worry about the fragments. I shed a buckle, I think. My belt feels sort of adjustable. But we were lucky. Don't let us forget that little fact."

Down the old stone road past the pretty lake, where the town folks so lately had done their washing in the true community style, sped the girls. Eyes straight ahead, not even blinking in the smoked and splintered atmosphere, through which the bits of everything seemed still to be flying, the lone car made its way. Soon others from the barracks would be able to cover the same road, but the fact that our friends had started out on an important mission, bearing a message to an officer, gave them the start. The thundering of guns tore the beauty of the afternoon, and the bursting of shells, all too near, blurred with their smoke the day that should have been blessed on earth.

"Slow down," suggested Valerie suddenly,

"I see something moving over there in the grass. Can't be anything but a man out here."

"I noticed that too. Seemed to be rolling down the hill. Will you go over? I'll turn in close to the field."

It took but a few moments for Valerie to reach the spot in the underbrush, where the rolling was now plain to be seen. Joan on the car watched for a signal which came directly. The old-time school girl thrill.

Sharp and clear, like some wild bird, the notes of the call came back, and without counting risk to car or self, Joan urged the ambulance over the edge of the bank that marked the road, then carefully felt her way over the wild brush and bramble.

"A boy," Valerie announced as the car came up. "He can't move, or he doesn't want to." This last was said in a half-laughing way.

"Not so bad then?" asked Joan.

"Not at all bad," came a reply from a voice that sounded like music to the girls. He was not suffering much; that was clear. In fact, he seemed very much opposed to their interference.

"Fancy him wanting to stay here," explained Valerie. "He simply won't listen to the word hospital."

At this the man on the ground covered his face with a hand that showed grime and even

blood. He was not only hurt, but troubled. He seemed to want to hide his face.

"I know I'll be all right in a short time," he declared with an accent that betrayed breeding. "I should really much prefer just to get around myself."

"Here in this swamp!" exclaimed Joan. "Don't you—trust us?"

"Oh, indeed I do," and he tossed his head proudly. "It is not that. But—well—I can't explain. Couldn't you——"

"You are thinking others need the car more than you do," interrupted Valerie. "But you know we never pass a man who is down. Please be good," she was smiling so prettily, "and let us take you up. You may lean on one, and hold on the other. Come on. Be a good sport now. You know these are busy times."

He was sitting with his arm back so as to be half up and half down. He tried to thrust out the leg that had been hit, but winced and slid back in evident pain.

"There, now you see you can't make it," declared Joan. "Rest a minute, and then give one jerk, till we get the support under you. Are you really not going to come along?"

"I feel like an ingrate," he said, "but girls, couldn't you let a fellow alone all by himself just to suit a poor simp?" he was trying hard to convince them, but certainly making little headway. "I know it's only a leg or two, and

just see ahead. There come the other cars."

Dashing over the road now came two more ambulances. Past the creek, beside which the girls were waiting, their companions rumbled on to the dressing station, where must lay the wounded and dead. The smoke lifting, showed in the evening's dusk many—too many, not following the ranks.

"Why?" Joan whispered to Valerie as she pretended to fuss with the car. "What do you think is the matter?"

"Hush, queer, but no shock. Something—mysterious. We *must* take him."

And when Joan said that, the soldier might just as well have gone gracefully, for those girls always win out.

CHAPTER II

THE MYSTERY BOY

"GREAT! Isn't it glorious. To think we got permission to take him to a little private sanitarium. I just feel our mystery boy is well worth it."

"Now, now, hold up there. Don't go falling in love. 'Gainst the rules. He is splendid. I love his eyes, and his hair, and his——"

"Oh, really, then what am I to fall in love with? Perhaps his—teeth. They are nice and white and straight."

"Now, Johnie dear" (Johnie was from Joan, and made for pet occasions) "let us get the bunk ready. He may slip off any minute if he finds his foot is capable. But isn't he queer?"

"Yes, and that nondescript uniform! It certainly was put together to deceive. Yet I would stake anything on his honesty. Those eyes could not lie."

"There you go again, Johnie. That sounds like the first and last stages. However, as I

said, I do not blame you. He is the nicest chap we have ever picked up. Let's guess his name. I make it Tom."

"Tom indeed! I make it Roger. He's too nice for plain Tom."

"Depends on how nice you can make Roger. Now my Tom is simply stunning."

With all the persiflage the girls were making ready the improvised resting place, for the soldier they had picked up so much against his will. The fact that the base hospital was crowded, also that it was far away, and that Joan had succeeded in convincing the captain of the corps that it was a wonderful idea to use this old home (which was only ten miles behind the lines) for such cases as were sure to mend quickly—all this accounted for the otherwise strange proceedings of the manner in which the girls had set up their star patient.

Only on their word that he would not be taken to a base hospital, and that word given as a promise, had they succeeded in picking him up at all. They knew that all cases had to go to the hospital far back and safe from fire; but in this case, where injury plainly would mend soon, and where the girls, following necessity of keeping him away from the hospital had reconnoitered to the extent of setting up an "emergency" near the lines, it had actually been arranged to turn the little cabin into a very useful place.

There a few patients could be cared for and at the same time a sort of canteen operated where the messengers, going and coming from the lines, also motor girls, could stop and give strength to body as well as to fagging cars, that needed one thing or another. Of course, a capable elderly woman was on the scene. In fact, she came with the scene, for it was her home the girls had taken over, and she had long been known to the motor corps. So it was that in tucking away Roger or Tom, whichever he might choose to be, the task was not really so very great after all.

"You may call me—Claude," he had answered them, but the way he said "Claude" told them how far it was from his name. "But at any rate please call the lead off," he begged. "Get me fixed up quickly girls, for honestly—" and he wagged his head, "I have an awful lot to do yet."

So he was admitting his necessity of getting back into action, while he could not mention his division, or anything about himself. He was actually so disturbed when Joan ventured to ask a simple question concerning his service, that she never tried it again. His secret, whatever it was, she felt was honorable.

But just how to account for his being away from the lines, without a division, and with all that mixed-up uniform—well, simply nothing was queer in war. That was the only ex-

planation and that did not explain it at all.

It happened on the second morning of his stay at the cabin, Joan came through the pass on her car earlier than usual. The plan had been for the old woman to care for the soldier following out such instructions as Joan or Valerie would leave, for he had also specified that no war doctor should come to him.

As his injury was one that required more time than attention, and as the girls were, of course, proficient in home nursing and first aid, the arrangements were made to suit his "Whimsie" as he called it himself. But on this morning Joan found the charge trying to get away. He had actually gotten out of the bunk and was painfully creeping to the door.

"Oh Boy!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing? Trying to break that leg really?"

He fell back exhausted. His face was white, and all the hidden fun was gone out of it. He was now a sad and serious man.

"I must—go," he panted. "Oh, why on earth—did all this have to happen?"

Joan took his hand. It was cold and wet. He fell back on the stone floor in utter despair. His eyes were closed, and he did not seem to care what happened to him.

"Couldn't you trust me?" Joan asked anxiously. "I believe in—you."

"Oh, do you? If only—everyone did," he managed to reply.

Following that advantage quickly, the girl pressed for confidence.

"Please let me help you. You have no idea how much we have managed to help—some others, in fact, a lot of boys. Couldn't you tell me all about it?"

"That's just it. I can't," he replied.

"Then, can't I help without knowing?" urged Joan. "I know you are loyal and true to our service, and I am willing to help you if I can."

For a brief moment she wondered why she had made such a declaration. Suppose he was not loyal and true? She had been trained in New York with agents of the Department of Justice, and she knew that appearances were not to be trusted. Yet, here she was vowing her belief under such suspicious circumstances.

"You're a brick, little girl," he declared, looking up quickly. "But I can't get you in wrong. I couldn't risk it on your account."

"Oh please, just tell me what you were going to try to do, and let me see if I cannot do it for you. I know" (she almost whispered this) "you have been worrying about something ever since we found you. Was it something you were after?"

"Yes," he replied slowly. "I left some things somewhere——"

"Oh, if that's all, just you tell me where," bravely spoke up Joan. "I am the best little

scout you ever met. Just you tell me where those things are, and watch me get them."

"If only you could," he faltered.

"Why on earth, why not?" she followed. "I know every stone that marks kilometer or tenth of one in these parts. Just say what it is, and where, and I'll get it or—die."

"I believe you would." Then he sat up and looked deep into her eyes. She felt he was examining her conscience for her, but at present she had no fear of the scrutiny. "I hid my—kit in a barrel, back of the old supply," he said slowly, and in a hushed voice. "Do you know where we left off last week?"

"I know. The station camouflaged with 'busted planes,'" volunteered Joan, hurrying lest he would change his mind, and withhold instructions.

"Exactly. I left a bag there, and it has papers—" the old woman was at the door.

"I'll get them, Jack," Joan whispered, pressing his hand as she used the good, old American brotherly term. "You just read that magazine Val brought you. You know you really are her patient, and you must take your reading doses regularly."

So saying, she had helped him back to the cot, put the magazine in his cold hand, and with a reassuring look, she was ready to leave.

"But promise—now promise to be good. Don't move till I come back," she insisted.

"I promise," he replied with a wan smile. But the sigh she heard, as she ran out, was not all an expression of misery.

CHAPTER III

LOOK WHAT BLEW IN!

ALAS for the plans of the girls and boys! No sooner had Joan fairly started on the road than she saw, speeding towards her, the car in which she knew Valerie and two others were coming in search of her.

Lieutenant Guthrie of Headquarters was beside Valerie. Salutes exchanged, the cars stood side by side.

"Good luck," announced the young lieutenant. "We hardly expected to overtake you. We have orders to go into Maffrecourt at once and rebuild. We have established a barracks, and have a lot of stuff blown down from heaven I guess. At any rate, it's material, and we are going to help the villagers put things together. We feel the boches won't pass this way again, and what we fix up will stay. Ever take any manual training?"

"Oh, yes, in Dad's barn. I've rebuilt that lots of times," replied Joan. But her voice did

not sing out as gleefully as Valerie had expected. The confidante instantly sensed something wrong.

"It's the cutest little place back of the court," volunteered Valerie. "I am sure we can make it look like a real hamlet in no time. Everything seemed to tumble down, but few persons were killed. They just ran out after the raid like we always thought tornado folks did in the states." She looked keenly at Joan, but the latter gave no sign.

"What's up, Johnie?" she asked finally. "Don't you feel—fit?"

"Nobby," answered Joan, "but I was just starting the other way. Have we got to go to the court at once?"

"Instantly," replied Val, "Can't you cork up the other matter or turn it over?" The chum seemed to know that what Joan was worrying over concerned the mystery boy. She would have given much for a private word, aside with the girl, whose golden ringlets were so prettily tangling with the shadows.

"I had just a little matter to arrange at the station," Joan ventured, addressing the lieutenant, "I think it will be wonderful to help the hamlet folks get back to housekeeping," she added this to assure the officer of her interest in the new commission. "As the children say 'whackies on the K. P.' (Kitchen Police) that is, if it includes eats."

"We cannot be sure of the supplies coming in at once," the lieutenant answered her, "but we have a new arrangement whereby the devastated places, near the army supplies, may take on stuff to a reasonable amount. To work quickly may save much labor later, also loss of life and loss of ambition."

"Oh, isn't it glorious to feel we can do something that will not be undone. Dare we think that the end is in sight?" Valerie said almost reverently.

"We dare," replied Lieutenant Guthrie. "But we must be starting, Private Mason, will you follow? We have stuff to lug this trip."

"Certainly," replied Joan respectfully. "But could I run back to the cabin for a moment? I won't be a second."

"Beat it then," said Valerie to cover up the space required for an answer. "I have to tighten a nut, and by that time we will be in line."

Taking that for permission, Joan hurried back to the boy on the cot, in the dark little hut. She whispered something, got a promise, took his hand on it, hurriedly murmured: "Sure now, you'll wait," then she was out on the road again with the "Humming Bird"—her own ambulance.

Let us leave the girls for a moment and peek in at the boy with the disabled leg. Mirabelle, the old caretaker, had given him broth, she had

put the biggest cushion under the sprained knee, she had even filled a new bag of sand, so that the well foot might balance with the one threatening to shrink, but Andrè, as she called the patient, had taken little notice.

All his French and her sparse English had been exhausted, yet she had not succeeded in gaining his attention.

"La la," she exclaimed. "La bonne cherie, ne-cest-pas?"

But the boy glared out of the small patched window, and of what was he thinking? That he had faith in Joan, we can guess safely: that he had promised to wait until she fetched the papers we also imagine: but now, that he had to think and wait, his active mind was searching for some explanation of his predicament. "All out of luck," was surely his motto.

"And to think," he murmured, "that it was this very week that I expected all the wonderful things."

Again the old woman was complaining in her plentiful French. Why would the boy not eat, not drink, not laugh, not see the sunset? Was it only the girls he could think of, when she, his mother, that had taken him to her heart, waited for him to live again? Did he not hear the guns, and was it not well to be safe? This last made him shudder. What boy wanted to be safe, and wanted to hear the guns from afar? Would Mirabelle just let in the little kitten that

was crying at the window? It was a stranger, surely, blown to their hut by the blast of a shell. Did she not hear it crying? So when she went to care for the kitten he was left in peace with his thoughts.

"Peace," he was thinking. "Peace," he muttered, "we want it, but we want it right!"

And now the girls were gone, with the prospect of staying away for days. The boy was not of the gloomy type, but just now things did look dark blue, and the sombre hue seemed to blur his brain.

Mirabelle brought in the kitten. She declared it was the very one some soldiers had stolen from her a full month ago. And was it not a miracle that the cat had come back? That meant something strange, and big, maybe peace, she declared; at least it meant very good luck, and she was wishing some of the new luck on Andrè.

"See the collar," she exclaimed in French, "even the very same little strap."

The boy slipped his finger under the strap. He felt something, a bit of paper, of course just a scrap caught there. But he tried to dislodge it, and it would not move. Then he became interested. He sat up straight, and took both hands to the task of examining the weather-beaten collar.

"What's this?" he asked the woman. "I feel a bit of paper!"

"Paper," she repeated. "Something just stuck to Pierre's strap, I will get it off," and she turned the strap almost inside out.

At this the little frightened animal made to get off, but she held it firm. A bit of paper might mean much, all war folks knew that well.

Finally, the adhesive tape which had held the slip gave way with the moisture of her fingers, and she held out a tiny scrap of very soiled paper. It was lettered. She passed it over to her Andrè.

"Gee whiz!" he exclaimed in good old U. S. A. Then he recalled that Mirabelle had worked in an American family and that she knew considerable English. So he withheld his enthusiasm.

"What is it?" she asked eagerly.

"Oh, just the weather, you know. Some fellows wanted us to know—frost might be here soon. Got a cricket sent from home." This last she did not quite understand. Mirabelle shrugged her bent shoulders. Then in rapid French she protested against the boys who would use her precious tabby for a messenger for that sort of nonsense; also she declared boys should not waste time, pencil and paper, even a scrap, to send around jokes.

But the boy had deciphered the note. His face glowed as he carefully tucked the yellow fragment into his blouse. He did not hear what Mirabelle was blabbing about. Through the

slit of a window he glared over the wild lanes, that lay between him and the ranks. On the other side he could just glimpse the barracks where he knew Joan and Valerie were working hard to put a little town back on its feet.

Then he sighed. He was getting in the habit of sighing.

"Let's try the broth now," he finally asked the old attendant, who was so pleased at the turn in his manner, that she rushed out, almost stepping on the still frightened Pierre. And Pierre got a good bowl of the ration intended only for convalescent soldiers, on account of all the excitement.

More mysteries to unravel? The boy was stretching his bandaged leg in a manner absolutely forbidden by his captors or caretakers, the Invincible Motor Girls.

Was he going to make the injured member carry him off very soon?

CHAPTER IV

A TOWN WHILE YOU WAIT

IF a band of girls in the United States were suddenly called upon to fix up a devastated town, it is safe to say mere boys would have no grounds for criticising the results. In America we have wood, we have timber, we have hammers and nails, and all sorts of appliances; but in the primitive parts of France the houses are all built of stone, the hammers are home-made and scarce, the big carts with their two wheels and their numbers of horses, each hitched in front of the next in tandem style, only more like a line of march single file, these were about all the resources our friends of the Motor Corps had access to in their drive to rebuild a town.

Also, the unit that had been attached to Windsor Barracks had been moved back to do special hospital work, so that Joan and Valerie had to do all the leading in the new corps, and consequently both girls had been promoted to

the rank of Lieutenant, Joan first and Valerie second. Not that the promotion really counted, for our girls worked as captains, or generals, or under whatever term, action was most needed at the time. Yet, it was a source of at least human satisfaction that such work as they had been doing, had gained proper recognition. The corps required a first and a second lieutenant to be complete.

Of the new girls, all from an Eastern college, our friends were acquainted with quite a number. This made the "digging in" more easily undertaken, for all, understanding one another, they were able to meet their respective tasks on the grounds of mutual enthusiasm.

"I am first-rate at propping up," insisted Joan. "Don't worry that the stones will fall on me. Just let me have a few of those young trees and notice how they stay put where I set them." She was making posts with available trees for timber.

"Seems to me that those shells made a specialty of blocking up doors," declared Georgia Stevens, as she gingerly freed the braid of her black hair from a big spike that belonged to a door jam. "Did you ever see so many and such heavy stones?"

"We are not to try to lift them," replied Valerie. "Special and positive orders. No girl on this job is allowed to put herself in the hospital right alongside the nicest boys from the

last fight. No sirr-ee. We have got to do this scientifically. Just map out the plans, and do what we can do, and then to-morrow, at daybreak we will have a corps of strong villagers to take care of the heavy lifting. Now, you know I'm foreman of the mason gang, and Joan you are boss of the carpenter squad. Private Neddie Black you are to do the interior decorating. Don't worry about the conventional in design, mix it up as much as you like, but leave room for folks to lie down—they especially want to have a rest room, and, of course, a place to eat, although lack of space would not hinder that operation."

"Look," shouted Joan. "My door is open. These stones were just waiting to be rolled back. I claim first goal."

Sure enough the house that had seemed a mass of ruins, was not so badly damaged at all. In fact, as the girls said, the shells appeared to have made more hits around door posts than on roofs. Of course, this was accounted for by the fact, that the concussion had loosened the supports, and the open spots simply crumbled in. Joan's achievement in rolling back the great jumble of stones made entrance to a splendid little home. As usual at the first alarm of a raid the town's folks had fled, and because this village was so close to the lines, the inhabitants felt doomed. Whereas, passing so quickly on, the rolling armies, and the

raids had really left them pretty well off—all things considered.

To get them back into the hamlet was not so easy, however. That is why the girls had been given the contract of clearing away the debris directly following their ambulance work at the battle fields. It was a strange sight. The Khaki-clad Motor Girls, climbing over low roofs, crawling into cellar holes, shouting back and forth, working willingly and capably.

"Oh, look here?" called Doris Gaffney. At least it probably was Doris, but all that could be seen of the sandy little motorist was the top of her brilliant head, sticking out of a hole in a roof. "This must be the green grocer's, or the supply station. Right under my left foot is a barrel of the finest potatoes, and all around me are oodles of the best smelling things. But I can't get to the main floor through this way. I have got to make a dugout into the first hole under the big post."

"Can you get out?" called back Georgia.

"Just about," replied her chum. "This is where gym work and the drill stuff are applied." At that she hoisted herself through the aperture, and came sliding down the roof, just like a girl in the movies. To find the supplies was an important discovery and all hands quickly bent to making the entrance to the partly demolished home, with its store combination.

"A window is our best guess," announced

Joan, when they had tried in vain to make a way through the door. "Take this window, and fix up a ladder with a door and a few cross pieces. I have nails from the barracks, and I wouldn't wonder if we could make a perfectly good little toboggan in less than no time." At this a heavy wooden door was placed on the stones and as Joan directed, the cross sticks for steps were nailed on.

"Here comes the captain!" called Valerie. "Glad we have a couple of things really done. I have just finished my plans for the children in my house. It is bigger than the others, and had a lot of bunks. We took the children all to Windsor," she told Joan, who was not with the first expedition. "And we have got to get them somewhere before to-morrow night."

"How many?" asked the practical Joan.

"A regular orphan asylum. Poor little kiddies, they were too scared to cry. You should see them fall into the soup."

" 'Low there!" called Captain Seeley, at which the girls, all who could spare a hand, saluted. "How are you making out?"

"Ready for the natives," came Joan's answer. "We have discovered that by giving a little coaxing, things fall to and like it. See this place?"

"You surely have worked, girls," replied the captain. "When I set you to it I had my doubts, but the villagers all seemed scared to death.

In fact, they had been waiting for the raid, and went out before they had reason to. You see this hamlet is especially favored. It is one of the old picture spots, and we didn't want it to get too much rough overhauling. I see the other girls coming up to report. Wonder what luck they had?"

"Oh girls," then seeing the captain. "Captain, we found something wonderful. Don't know what it is. It looks like—a steel cage—or something. Maybe there are prisoners in it!"

It was Lottie Teeter who gave out the news, and in spite of the best training Lottie was still called the Baby of the Regiment. She was excitable, nervous and lovely, as babies mostly are.

"A cage!" repeated Captain Seely. "Where!"

"Down by the little church. It is buried under the ground. We ran back——"

"Of course you did," interrupted the captain. "And that was right enough. You need help for anything like that. Fall in, girls. Let's all go to the cage. Suppose we should find our old friend—Captain Kidd!"

Dropping everything they were working with, the Motor Girls ran to their cars. There were four of them, and carried a load of girls in each. Lottie was even more excited than she had appeared at first, for each time she told of the cage it worked up bigger in her vision. She insisted she had seen the barred doors

and the great steel bands, and she thought she heard rumbling——

Joan's mind reverted to the mission she had started out on when the new work was given her. The old supply station was not far from the spot now declared by Lottie to be the scene of the cage. And Joan recalled that her mystery boy had urged she get his bag from the barrel as quickly as possible.

Suppose it was all a sinister plot! Suppose he knew about the cage and that——

Foolish! Surely he had no thought of making prisoners of his friends! Preposterous. Even to conceive such fears seemed wicked.

Then the memory of his dark, handsome eyes filled Joan's mind. Of course, very strange things were continually happening, but, Joan decided, nothing so strange as disloyalty from that boy *could happen.* If she could only get his bag? Perhaps now, when they reached the cage, she would be able to find the old water barrel.

"There it is!" screamed Lottie from the car ahead. "See the smoke coming out of the ground?"

Yes, they all saw the little cloud of smoke, and straightway made for it.

CHAPTER V

MISSING IN ACTION

IN the car with sturdy little Captain Seely rode Joan and Valerie, as they were the officers to advance.

"I want to explain," said the captain, as they slowed down over a very bad spot in the path, it could not be called a road, "the reason we undertook to fix up the little town is, that the engineers have a very large contract on, in fact, we are all waiting for good news. The division just passed along, stopped at our barracks, and the officers talked over what the girls could do. Orders were, to get the towns back to normal as quickly as possible, and I volunteered to look over this end. We have to set up division headquarters here, so we want the people to be on hand to attend to their tasks. They can help. It has been reported that the best stores in these parts are in this little town, and we are going to see that our boys are able to get

some real home cooking if possible. A canteen in on the programme."

"We have already discovered the valuable supplies," Valerie told, "some of the houses seem packed to the roofs. I guess our last visit from Fritz had to do with that knowledge."

"More than likely," answered the captain. "There is also another suspicion abounding here. A German plane came down not long ago, left off a couple of passengers and then flew away. We have not been able to pick up the passengers."

Joan's heart gave a jump. What if the boy was implicated in all this?

But there was no time now for speculation. Already the girls in the next car were signalling, and Lottie was wildly waving toward the small patch of the forest still standing beyond a narrow stream.

Sure enough there was the end of something, very like a cage plainly to be seen above the ground even at this distance. Quickly the spot was reached, and the tools the girls had been using in making their town over, were pressed into service. Of course, the queer hoes were the best available implements to dig out with. Fortunately the earth surrounding the big hidden thing was still very soft, and showed recent action.

Heavy bars of steel were soon uncovered by

Valerie and Doris Gaffney, who were working together. A few feet away Georgia Stevens and Joan were tugging together with a big limb of a tree, that in falling, had become buried with the hidden "cage."

"All pull together here," called Joan. "If we can get this out we will have it all uncovered."

"Good idea," agreed the captain, "but be careful in the tug-of-war that you don't roll down into the stream. When it gives away at your point, Lieutenant Mason, things will happen."

"Just like old college days," Valerie reminded her companion with a spare breath. "I was always a star as end man in the tug. Let me try it now."

Then the entire corps of khaki-clad workers gripped the rough, huge tree at any point, or part, that was clear enough to get a grip on. Some of the smaller branches showed remarkable strength, and as the tree had only lately fallen, there was no danger of finding dead or rotten wood in it.

"One, two, three! Now all together," shouted Joan, and with the united tug, slowly but surely, the big tree moved, then sprang, and finally seemed to actually jump out of the ground, taking the girls along with it in its force. Just as Captain Seely had predicted, they all rolled down to the edge of the stream.

"Whoa there!" sang out Lottie. "I don't want to get my new boots wet."

"I'm just as careful of my puttees," declared Georgia.

"If I had a choice," joked Joan. "I'd keep this blouse fresh."

"Me for the skirt I just received from Paris," finished Valerie.

But little time was lost in the remarks. So eager were the girls to see what they had unearthed. Back over the broken stones and piles of clay they sprang nimbly as only girls in fine trim, and finer training, could show themselves. No wonder Uncle Sam banked on his girls and no wonder America claimed victory in advance with such united forces.

"Here we are!" announced the captain. No girl would take the privilege from her, hers to report the wonder. "Here is our prize, and it certainly is one. Just see. The missing tank!"

Awed, the corps of workers stood before the big, half-buried monster. Sure enough it was the tank lost days ago, and its men never accounted for. It must have been buried in a shell volcano and could not be dug out. But what of the men?

"Can we get inside," asked Georgia, who was already perched on the topmost point, and trying to peer in through a small broken patch of metal. "I can see a—big hole!"

"An empty hole?" asked the captain, taking the girl's light query definitely.

"No, there's a lot of things. It's like a room. I'll bet the boches lived here."

"They never had a chance to set up housekeeping in these diggings," answered the captain decisively. "More likely our boys did the fixing up if there was any done. Let me see. Here is a weak spot. Perhaps another tug would fetch down a couple of these bars. Then we could investigate inside."

"Don't you think we will soon have to give up for to-day," warned Valerie, whose office warranted her reminding the captain of the coming darkness. "I notice now the night falls quickly, and we are far from quarters."

"You are right, Lieutenant," answered the captain gratefully. "Another half-hour will be our limit."

"Oh, let's hurry," chorused the girls. "We wouldn't sleep a wink to-night if we failed to finish our discovering," added Joan.

At this she swung her full weight on a bent bar that seemed to hold a barricade in place. As she fell with it, she uncovered something crudely written, evidently with a piece of sharp stone, on the front of the tank. They all saw it instantly.

"We got away. If not found look for us at——," the place mentioned was the name of a German prison camp.

"Thank goodness," breathed the captain fervently. "At last the mystery of the lost tank is cleared up. And what news for headquarters! The men lost here were all to be cited, and not a trace of them has been found. Never mind the inside or anything else. Our duty now is to get back to the barracks. Girls—I don't want to flatter you, but this—was—great work!"

"Valerie," whispered Joan, "I must speak to the captain alone. I must tell her something —Oh Val! I am so anxious! Do you thing that I could beg off to run back to the shack?"

"What is it?" asked the chum, noting Joan's anxious face. "Anything new the matter?"

"Yes and no. I hope there isn't, but I fear there is. I want to get over to the old water barrel without being noticed. How can I manage it?"

Valerie thought for a moment. All were making ready for the trip back. Then she said under her breath:

"Ride with Lottie. When you get opposite the spot, stop suddenly. We will go on ahead. Then you can jump out and easily manage the rest—with Lottie."

But it was not quite so easy to accomplish as planned. Hidden articles in open fields, following war raids, are by no means safe in the aftermath. It was a little bag, technically called the "treasure bag," the sort which originated with the Montclair girls—this was what Joan

was to hunt for. Of course, the bag would be in a tin can, or under some cover, as it was important and contained materials the mysterious soldier had begged her to bring to him.

The cars were on well ahead now, Joan was on the first, and moved slowly. Finally she was in line with the remains of the former supply station. Old barrels, boxes and other left-overs were piled about.

"I have to get something here," she suddenly told Lottie. "It won't take but a few minutes."

CHAPTER VI

THE TREASURE BAG

"I HAVE it! I have it!" shouted Joan, although her companion was close beside her.

"Oh, I'm so glad. I am almost scared to death. What will the captain say?"

"Lottie dear," Joan assured her, "I have had a lot of experiences, and I have always found that even captains are very reasonable when it comes to what looks like real work. Now we had to get this. I have got it, and I have to keep the matter quiet for a time. You have promised to trust me and to follow me, so we must make some reasonable excuse for our delay. Of course, Captain Seely knows we would only be out on important business, so why worry? Leave it to little Johnie," she finished up, tugging playfully at the arm of the frightened Lottie.

"All right, but it's up to you. If they cross-question me I'll have to get writer's cramp in

my tongue," and she took to the same jump that Joan had set the pace with to reach the waiting motor car.

"What's that!" asked Joan stopping short, as something like a howl came from the roadway.

Lottie grasped her friend's arm. "Oh, do you think it's the——"

"No, girlie, I don't. I think that is a child. I have heard children wail that way when they get too tired to cry the other way. Listen!"

Again and more clearly came the wail. It was human, that was certain, and it sounded like more than one voice.

"Might be—men, trying to trap us," offered the morbid Lottie.

"Girlie, girlie! Where's your training?" demanded Joan. "Why pick on nerves? Wait until you see if this doesn't come out perfectly lovely. I am so glad to get my treasure bag I simply couldn't worry about anything. Look! What's that poking out of our car. I'll bet it's the noise machine."

With one more sprint over the rough way Joan was beside the little service car.

"Well, mercy me!" she exclaimed. "What is all this? An orphan asylum showered down with the raid? Dear little ones!" she added in French, addressing a car full of urchins, she was now facing. "Where have you come from?"

Blabbering, blubbering and sputtering was a knot of ragged babies, huddled together among the tools and equipment in the back of the car. One girl managed to free herself from the others, and also to pry her voice loose from the babble. She told with apologies and entreaties, how they all had been running from the raid of the day before, and how the children had become separated and lost. It seemed the little band comprised all that were left of two neighboring families; parents all gone, fathers in the war and mothers dead or in hospitals.

"And if you please, la Capitaine," begged the girl. "We want to go back home. We can be safe now, and I can be the mother."

Beautiful little French girl named Louise! Flashing eyes and tangled black curls! How she mothers the frightened band of babes, and how she speaks up for their protection!

In all the world's war the children's sorrows are most pitiful. Yet, how courageously they struggle to live, they who have just earned the right to live.

"Surely To-To," replied Joan to the girl's appeal, and using the pet name for Louise, "Of course you must go home, but not to-night. To-night we shall all go together and have a fine supper." (Even the baby clapped his hands as she talked of supper.) Presently Joan was at her place ready to drive. Whether with the prospect of eating, or their delight at a ride,

the children grabbed the girls by skirt or coat, and held on for their little lives. Lottie talked to them, a child herself always, she soon forgot her own anxieties in listening to the story told by Louise. To think these tender little ones had been walking and "falling down" all the day, and the night before! But it was never dark, Louise insisted, because they had a beautiful moon, and that moon was also with the mothers and fathers who were gone. So, the children had slept by the side of an old house in the protection of the moonbeams, sent to shelter them by the absent parents.

Devotion, love and sacrifice! Each perfecting the other!

"It made for us a blanket," said the child with naivetè, and the memory of the moonbeams still sparkled in her eyes.

Joseph was very tired now. He was the smallest and the fattest baby, although one wondered what magic had kept him chubby. Perhaps the sunshine working in partnership with the moonbeams. Small as she was, Louise, seeing his head drop on his ragged coat, quickly cradled him in her arms, and now all the wailing and sobbing had ceased. Only the purr of the motor gave music to the grateful little ears.

"Didn't I tell you we wouldn't have to look for an excuse," Joan reminded Lottie. "What do you suppose the girls will find to feed to our infants? It is long past broth hour, almost

time for midnight lunch. My, we are getting brave! See the light over that hill."

To see the light was a promise of peace. It indicated that at least many, if not all dangers were past. True, they were scarce and flickered up and down, even went out very often, but they were lights when they shone.

Joan and Lottie pulled up the lane. This was not the first carload of children to come unexpectedly to the barracks; neither was there any delay in finding suitable food after the car was unloaded. My, how those babies ate and drank and gobbled! The canteen service of metal ware seemed likely to smother the little faces buried too deeply in the savory contents. Mignon with the two light braids of hair, evidently having been braided days and days before, had passed her bowl back for the soup twice, but Louise was so busy assisting the others she scarcely tasted her big brown crackers, made "by hand" by the girls of the canteen.

"Just let her enjoy herself," ordered Captain Seely, in answer to the protest from the motor girls that Louise was insisting upon serving, "she is such an active little girl it would be a pity to make her think her services were not useful, and that we did not appreciate them. In fact, a child like that can do what we can scarcely undertake with the neighborhood babies. When we set up our next shelter I intend to make use of such girls as Louise. While

they have to be away from school it is a splendid opportunity to give them some real domestic science. Also, they can assist us with their intimate knowledge of the habits of the little ones."

She stood at the side of the table, admiring the manner in which the little French mother went from child to child, all along the bench, giving this one another slice of bread, and demanding that the other should drink every drop of soup that Jèan would unceremoniously have left for the promised sweet cracker now arriving at the board. Very little sweet was in the cracker, but it looked different, and to the tots who had suffered hardships for days, no delicacies could have been more acceptable.

While Joan and Valerie were hurrying about making up bunks for the babies Joan had a chance to confide to her chum:

"I have it. I found it! If I can only get back to the shack in the morning," she murmured.

"Terribly interested in our Tom," teased Valerie. "Couldn't I take it?"

" 'Tisn't Tom, it's Roger," Joan whispered back, "and no one can take it back to him but me. I have been commissioned."

"Good luck," replied Val. "I expect to see you all dolled up with cites (citations) shortly. How many stripes do you get for assisting in mysteries?"

"My mystery is about to unravel. And when it does—bing—bang—biff! Look out for shocks!"

"Remember the pledge. No girls are to be engaged, or fall in love——"

But Joan was out of hearing before her chum could finish the surreptitious order. It was a motto of the Motor Corps that fun should be dug out of all ruins. That after every hard piece of work relaxation should come in the way that only healthy, hearty, happy girls can dig it up, and that all work is play, when hands are willing and hearts are light. The barracks were not actually so placarded with the written words, but with a publicity committee composed of the faces, voices and eyes of the Trusty Twenty there was no need for hard, cold type and perishable paper.

"To serve!" was enough.

Captain Seely called Joan, "Joan I have a little contract for you in the morning. Report to me by seven-thirty!"

Thus spoke the captain, and when Joan saluted she wondered whether the contract would prevent her from getting the treasure bag to the boy.

"Never trouble trouble, till trouble troubles you, and if you never trouble trouble, trouble won't know how to get at you," she rhymed away, as she tossed off the heavy shoes, and listened for the last hushed voices from the

children's quarters. Louise was telling them how wonderful it would be when they all would get back home again.

"And Joseph shall have the big red apple," she promised, but Joseph didn't hear, for he was sleeping. "And Jèan shall have two rides on Bebe. And Mignon may have the doll the American lady gave Marie, for Marie is gone, and Miette may feed the chicks. What a lovely time—" All this was said in French, exactly as any little American girl might have said it, for the language of love is the same the world over.

But the last thought that registered on Joan's brain, as she dropped asleep, was "treasure bag and Roger." She wondered what the boy might be doing? Where was he and of what might he be thinking? It was always danger, often death——

It is admitted hearts do not shut very securely, nor can they hide their secrets behind distance nor obstacles. Perhaps Joan felt this when she once more assured herself that the boy was true and loyal to that Cause, which is as big as the world, and as deep as the rights of humanity.

CHAPTER VII

CAPTAIN JOAN, PRO-TEM

NEXT day it rained. What an incessant tattoo beat on the flat roof of the barracks! How very early the children were talking, and how promptly the odor of cooking came from the chow corner of the canteen.

Joan had squeezed the little treasure bag in her hands until the contents, if alive, must have been ready to squeal. She was never nervous, that is "not so as you'd notice it," she insisted, but getting this precious bag back to the disabled boy did seem like a real task.

Promply at seven-thirty she stood at attention awaiting Captain Seely's orders in the curtained corner called the "office."

"Lieutenant Mason," began the captain, "you have shown splendid spirit and unfailing courage. You may not realize what it means for me to have girls able to keep the whole flock in good humor, and always cheerful. This is

as valuable as your active service, although your work is beyond compute in actual worth. I have been ordered farther back, to get a new corps in shape for hospital service, and I have recommended you to my place here, with the rank of captain pro-tem. You are too young to be made captain officially."

"To be captain pro-tem!" Joan could not help exclaiming.

"Why yes. You are very young, of course, but you know the land here, and you have proven yourself efficient. I am going to make Second Lieutenant Warde first lieutenant, so that you can depend upon her for your personal assistant."

"Then," continued the captain, "we shall move the others up so you will have a full and efficient corps."

Joan could not get her surprise and thanks into words. What it meant for her to be captain "while you wait," we must realize, when we consider that the captain is almost free to follow her own plans in each motor corps. The general plan is in the complete system, all are trained alike, all understanding the same principles of discipline, and this discipline is really quite as severe as that of the true military, after which the motor corps are fashioned. Consequently, when one is qualified to hold the high office of captain, it means she understands and is capable of directing a corps. This would

give Joan the very freedom she especially craved. Now she could get the papers back to the boy.

"Of course," went on Captain Seely, "I have known, since you came over, of the splendid record you and your friend brought with you. I have heard about your work for the Department of Justice, and that gives you a peculiar qualification for office now. You see how things are changing almost daily. How soon we may expect a complete change no one can tell, but to have our corps up to the top notch is most important, and I am sure my confidence in you is not going to be misplaced."

"Thank you, Captain," Joan managed to express at last. "I feel strong enough to do anything, and I am eager to do—everything."

"That is precisely the spirit we must have. You have said it without realizing how truly you have spoken. To feel able to do, and want to do, embodies all the principles of true service.

"I hope I shall be able to lead, and give orders, and all that," faltered Joan, who just then imagined herself in the predicament of having to discipline someone for overstaying leave, or for holding too much conversation with strangers, men on march, or men of the Quartermaster's Department especially.

"You have no cause to worry on that score," replied the captain, "for I have watched you for some time. You possess the faculty of lead-

ing without knowing it, and that is the secret of success of our best officers. The girls are all fond of you, and that is another requisite; not exactly requisite for we cannot all have it, but it is very desirable and valuable. I have asked headquarters not to disturb the present personnel of this corps, so that you need not fear having to deal with strangers, although, from what I know of you, that would hardly faze you."

"I will do my best," responded Joan, in true military fashion, saluting and clicking her heels together.

"And now," finished Captain Seely, "as it rains so heavily, and because you have all done such wonderful work during the past week, while there is a lull at the front, I am granting a holiday to-day. Shortly your friends will discover you, and I am turning the post over to you, Captain Mason."

Saying this she stood, saluted and pinned on Joan's humble blouse the badge of promotion. Visions of all the new buttons, and the stripes that go with captaincy flashed before the mind's eye of the astonished Joan. To be a captain. What would dear old Daddykins say! And how would she carry it all off in New York if she held the promotion?

But a racket, a wild shouting and a hammering of tin pans and other available noise makers, brought Joan out of her temporary reverie.

Of course it was the girls coming to pay homage, as they presently announced with a college whoop. Then they took Joan on their shoulders, carried her in and out of the doors and around the barracks, not minding the drenching rain. The "parade" was some time in passing the "review stand," the one big chair in a corner. The "line" included all the corps, the French children, the extra cook, the boy who carried the messages, and the old woman who was not able to travel on with the refugees when they fled, leaving the bombarded town two days before.

For music, besides all the cooking utensils, the merry makers had the full orchestra of harmonicas, left to the girls by the grateful boys who went to the front ten days before. On the mouth organs the girls had learned to play a lot of jolly tunes. Altogether it was "some parade," the noise being interspersed with paper flags made by Louise and consisting of papers threaded on sticks, each banner being inscribed, "Vive la France and Vive l'Amerique."

Of course in granting the holiday, Captain Seely was very wise, for she realized the esprit de corps must be kept up, and spirit is only made sure of by proper recreation, and enough of healthy, honest fun.

Following the "parade" Joan was carried into the captain's quarters and perched on the

highest shelf of the supply corner. There she sat, her feet dangling down, and her pretty curls getting loose to join in the fun of their own accord.

"Speech! Speech!" yelled her companions, and when Joan had given the "speech" and listened to the cheers, she was finally allowed to come back to earth.

In the excitement it was most amusing to note the effect of real mirth on the war stricken babies. They had so long been restrained, so long been in hiding, and so long been fearing, that to them, the end of the war could mean no more than did this.

"Is mama home?" asked the bewildered Mignon, as she squatted in with the others to eat extra rations given out in honor of the new captain. A good time and mama home could not be separated in her way of reasoning.

"She is a mama for all," explained the wise Louise, pointing proudly to Captain Joan, who was just then tying a handkerchief into a wonderful duck for baby Joseph. "She is la capitaine, and officer and mama and everything," said the little French girl, although her words were chosen with much better effect and precision than ours in translation.

But Mignon could not so soon forget the real mama, who had held her so close to her heart during all the nights of terror. She wanted her now even, in the midst of pleasure, for

the big guns still boomed occasionally, and the smoke was still crawling over the distant hills.

"You know I am not really captain," Joan insisted to the girls. "Someone had to be put in charge, and I was made the—lamb, I wouldn't dare say 'goat,'" she finished, running short on originality.

"Lamb you are," decided Valerie, who was as pleased with her friend's honors as if they had been bestowed upon herself. "And you are a real captain, of course," kissing the much flushed cheek of Joan. "But girlie, how about the papers?" she whispered. "Can't you order me to take them to the boy now?"

"You know, Val, I must do that myself," answered Joan, who had replied to this question and to her friend's teasing more than once. "I should love to have the task over, but I must do it, and I must do it soon. I can think of nothing else, and I have to be off to-day no matter what excuse I make. Can't you think of something?"

"Joy is never complete," Valerie reminded her. "I must find some reason for sending you over the road. There goes Captain Seely. What's to hinder you from running off now?"

"Could I, do you think? I wouldn't like to do anything risky now, above all times. But it is part of our work, only—I can't just report it—yet."

"But when you can?" half queried Valerie. "Won't it make a great showing?"

"How can I tell. Suppose I am wrong, that he is——"

"Bah, bah, black sheep, you are tangling up your wool!" and Valerie gravely touched the new badge that made Joan the captain pro-tem. "Oh, it has stopped raining," she looked out at the drenched trees, and saw a blade of sunshine cutting through the clouds. "Now you may go surely, Joan, and tell us if we can start back on our rebuilding. Just take Lottie, and the service car and——"

"Val, you're a perfect dear. You should have been made the pro-tem. I think the treasure bag would have burned a hole in my pocket if it stayed there another hour." She put her two fingers in her mouth and emitted the call whistle. "There's Lottie. I'll get the car. Wish me luck!"

"The very best, Pro-tem. I suppose we shall have to call you Pro or Tem. Which shall it be?"

"Joan is good enough for me," she called back as she rushed out around the barracks to the shed where the cars were housed.

"The darling!" exclaimed Valerie. "But I wish she had the mysterious boy and his troubles off her precious hands. I am not quite sure how it will turn out."

Louise was waving her dish towel and the girls were "pegging" salutes at the service car

as Joan and Lottie whirred out into the road.

"You drive, Lottie," Joan said. Then she grasped more securely the treasure bag in both hands beneath the folds of her khaki coat.

She had a feeling the precious bag might take wings.

CHAPTER VIII

WAR CLOUDS

"GONE!" exclaimed Joan. "Mirabelle, when did he—go?"

"Last night in all the rain," replied the old woman wringing her wrinkled hands. "I beg of him to stay. But no. He made a stick for help and his poor foot——" she was almost in tears.

Joan sank down in utter dejection. She had delayed too long. The soldier could not wait for her.

"But he left a letter," the woman bethought presently. "He would not let me put it any place but here," and she drew from her breast the letter.

Eagerly Joan grasped the bit of paper. It did not take long to make sure of its contents.

"Please burn my bag," he had written. "I cannot explain."

Joan turned over the slip. Yes, there was another word. It was simply, "Good-Bye, Dear

Little Motor Girls." There was no signature.

Her blue eyes were swimming as she turned to Mirabelle. For a moment the girl could not trust her voice, but next she tossed up her head, in that thoroughbred way, and soon had marshalled her courage.

"Could he—walk?" she asked.

"Just hop a little," whined the woman, who was plainly very fond of her charge. "I think he must fall, but all day I have not found him. No, he is gone, to the battle, of a certain."

"Of course," repeated Joan.

How desolate and empty the hut was now! All the life had gone out of it with the boy. Even the tabby cat lay curled up on his bunk, a dismal gray lump of fur, without a shiver of life moving beneath. Joan wanted to run away from the place. She had left Lottie outside in the car. Mirabelle was again busy making a place for some new comer, as she had been told the hut would be used for any boy who was not so severely injured as to require surgical attention. But Joan did not think of any more boys "slightly injured." Surely she would never find another case like the one that had just dimissed itself.

But she could not long indulge in her own worries; she must now turn to the problem of the woman and babies. How would it be to bring the children back to Mirabelle, and let them stay with her until the other homes, with

caretakers could be set up? This would relieve the barracks of the charges, for welcome though they were, the children could not be kept long there.

"The other house?" asked Joan, indicating the stone heap outside of this, "that could be used for—children?" she asked.

"For babies?" the woman questioned in surprise.

"Yes, we have about a dozen. We took them to the barracks, found them after the raid. We have to fetch them back near their homes. Could you take charge?"

Mirabelle could take charge of anything, and any one, even the biggest officers, she proudly proclaimed, and Joan went away promising to be back early next day.

"Everything all right?" Lottie asked her, noting the change in her expression.

"Yes and no. We had a sick boy there who has discharged himself. I am not sure he was able for much service."

"What was his division?"

Joan hesitated a moment. If she only knew the correct answer to that question.

"I think he was a marine," she hazarded. "But his uniform had been so broken up he may have been a scout of any outfit."

"Oh, of course, a scout always makes me think of a masquerade," replied Lottie. "But I did hope to meet that boy. I had heard of him."

"How?" questioned Joan in surprise.

"Well, you know a strange plane came down here not long ago, and after it flew up some one saw strange soldiers hiding, and running about. No one just knew who saw them, but every one said someone else told them. You knew how that sort of thing goes."

Lottie talked in that disconnected fashion peculiar to the nervous, and perhaps to the sensational. She had heard what someone else had heard, and what someone else had said. In spite of the confusion of alleged facts, however, Joan knew there was a rumor such as Captain Seely had told her of. She decided she must find out how Lottie knew there had been a boy at the hut. This information had not been given out at the barracks.

"You say you wanted to meet the boy? Who said there was anyone being cared for there?" she asked directly.

"Let me see," Lottie was driving, and now bent over her wheel. "I think it was Neddie Black. You know she is an awful prowler. She isn't afraid of anything, not even General Pershing could faze her, I believe. She would walk right up to him, and ask him for a button, if he should come along to inspect. By the way, when do we have inspection?"

"No time for such formalities now," replied Joan. "I have to make out a report that is supposed to cover inspection. Captain Seely

is too busy to dictate. You see I took a secretarial course."

"My, but you are accomplished," said Lottie in genuine admiration. "All the things you know how to do!"

For one fleeting moment it did seem Joan might have been just as well off if she were not so capable, for ability meant all sorts of tasks, but the next, she had banished the thought as unworthy, and was almost prayerful in her resolve to serve to the limit.

As they sped along, the little treasure bag felt lumpy in her pocket. Should she burn it, as the owner had asked? That seemed unfair. Why could she not keep it and hope some day to turn it over to the boy? Then the thought of what might be written on those bits of paper, what harm might be done if this fell under official eyes! Oh, how confusing it all was. Was it dangerous to hold it? She must talk the whole matter out with Valerie and decide what to do, and do that and nothing else, she decided.

Having come to that conclusion, she was able to close her mind on the reflections which just now seemed to be knocking for a chance of recognition on her thinking reflector. Duty, always duty, the determination to push on and win with the boys, to be able to claim a share in the great victory coming, was it not all very worth while?

"Did you ever hear of the Cross Roads spy?" was the astonishing question Lottie put next.

"Why Lottie," replied the captain pro-tem, "where have you been getting all this information? Seems to me some new battalion of news must have passed along. What about the spy of the Cross Roads?"

"Oh, I happened to hear she wrote letters, threats and like that," was the irrevelant answer, just such as we might have expected from the girlish little Lottie.

"To whom?" pressed Joan.

"Oh, I don't know just who got them, but I heard the girls from the corps, the Parkers, talking about it. She must have been awfully clever. No one could get her until— Why, it was you who caught her! Fancy me forgetting that the honor was ours," and Lottie blushed beautifully at her momentary forgetfulness.

"But she gave us the slip," Joan told her. "You know we had her all safe and sound in the ambulance; she seemed to be almost dead, and when we went to take her out she had flown. I never saw such a trick," and Joan smiled meaningly at the unpleasant memory.

"It is rather dangerous to have her loose," commented Lottie. "Do you suppose we will ever get another try at her."

"I wouldn't wonder. She said in a threatening letter that she would soon be in Germany, but the Kaiser has often said he would soon be in Paris. Their promises do not hold good. However, if we do meet the Princess again we

have it all arranged just how we are going to hold her."

"How?" asked Lottie, wide-eyed.

"Oh, just wait girlie," replied Joan. "If you hear any more real news on this trip I am afraid you will go up in the air like a shell, filled with spontaneous combustion."

"Here we are," Lottie announced. "My what a beautiful fence the children have made! Louise is a wonder. We had better take her in the corps," she suggested.

"Not a bad idea," agreed Lottie.

They were drawn up to the barracks now, and all around the big temporary building the children, guided by the indefatigable Louise, had twined light brambles and switches in such a way, as to make a really rustic fence. The little ones were having a wonderful time. They were now wearing a new outfit, the refugee garments sent by the American Red Cross, and just received in the last allotment that came overseas. Those of us who have given to the great collections of garments, we who have sacrificed something in sending a coat or a favorite blouse or skirt, if we could just see Louise, and her fence-building squad, togged out in the garments, we would, indeed, have felt well repaid for our slight effort.

"La Capitaine," called the little leader, as Joan came up.

"Salute!" she ordered the little ones. "Pre-

sentez arms!" she shouted, and the babies presented their sticks, and their big spoons, used for shovels, in true military fashion.

Joan stood and returned the salute. She could not but admire the manner in which Louise led the children. "I wonder if I can lead as well," she reflected. "I wish I did not have to play captain. But, mine not to reason why, mine but to do," she did not add "and die," as the old wonderful charge of the Light Brigade directed.

"Oh, Captain Joan," called Valerie, running out to meet the girls, "there are all kinds of important messages here for you." She took Joan's arm to hurry her along. "Such big official envelopes and seals. Pray, Captain, make haste. Inform your humble suite of what portends these documents!" she begged. "But if they say to move on or to move off in the language of the good old U. S. poets, 'Nothing Doing.' Here we stay until it's all over, over there in the trenches. Joking aside, Joan, I do hope it is not orders to move. I have taken root in Windsor, and I don't feel I could thrive in any other barracks. Do read your messages."

In spite of every effort to remain plain, Joan, the newly appointed captain had unconsciously taken on dignity. Perhaps it was a sort of reverence for the office, certainly Joan could not be accused of self-consciousness. At any rate,

when she took the sharp-edged piece of tin, a scrap of plumber stuff used for a paper cutter, and with this deliberately cut open one after another of the official communications, even Valerie looked on with awe. She did not interrupt Joan as she read the messages. Changes in the young officer's expression might be variously interpreted. Finally she looked up, and the old-time Joan came back.

"It is all right," she said quietly. "Our report on the finding of the lost tank has gone to headquarters. Captain Seely hinted it will mean much—for us, but what is better still, is, that it does mean much to the service. They are already tracing the lost men. The government is giving out a special report. Think of Khaki Girls being in a world's report! We have to live up to our reputation now."

"Oh Joan, you icicle! Why don't you have a fit or something, Johnie?" begged Valerie. But presently she softened her voice and her eyes. "Is anything wrong with—the boy?" she asked.

"He's gone," Joan replied.

"Gone! How could he? Didn't he leave any message?"

"Yes, but I can't tell you now. We must have a long talk soon."

"I will be with you as soon as I finish cleaning my ambulance," offered Valerie. "We have all used our holiday to put our cars in A num-

ber one condition. We found lots of nuts and things to tighten up, but it was lovely to have a lot of time to do it all in."

"I need never worry about the sort of holiday you girls take," Joan replied, feeling that was as much of a compliment as she was "official" enough to offer. "Look for me in an hour," she finished, and Valerie ran back to the ambulance that had seen so much service it might almost be regarded as a live member of the corps.

CHAPTER IX

KHAKI GIRLS IN CONCLAVE

JOAN and Valerie could not "run up to their room to talk it over" as they would have done at home. No room to run to now, and little time for talk, but this important matter of disposing of the contents of the treasure bag had to be settled.

It was in the shed that served for a garage that the girls managed to meet at the time appointed by Joan. Again it was near nightfall, and night always brought anxiety to the Motor Corps Girls.

"Val, dear, I am all in," confessed Joan.

"You don't look it," reassured the other.

"Perhaps not, but what with playing captain and being custodian of——"

"Do let me see the bag," interrupted Valerie. "I am just crazy to see what the wonderful object looks like."

Joan drew the little trinket out of her pocket. "Nothing wonderful about the bag, and I

haven't dared look at the contents. I wanted you with me when I investigated."

"Just a little khaki bag," exclaimed Valerie, "yet when the girls at home made them, how little they dreamed of their value to the boys? If our boy had not had this what would he have done with the—treasures?"

"I would not think of examining the bag," explained Joan, "if I did not feel it plainly my duty to do so. Not that I expect to find damaging evidence. I feel just as sure of that boy as if he were my own brother——"

"So do I," declared Valerie. "No one could be disloyal and at the same time so plainly interested and eager to help as he was."

"Yet, we are only following our convictions, and circumstantial evidence. We would have to have more than that to make ourselves clear in an investigation if anything went wrong."

"That is where your training in the Department of Justice stands by you, Joan. I am sure you will make a first-class detective if your Dad's money ever gets astray."

Joan sighed. "Dear old Dad." She glanced up quickly. "No time for the sob act" (the bag lay waiting her hands) "I wanted you to be with me, Valerie, when I opened the tiny kit, then, if eventually any article should be missed, or if we have to make any report you can corroborate me."

"My, how important! What do you ex-

pect to find in the harmless little khaki kit?"

"Who knows? But he asked me to burn everything. I feel a little queer not to oblige. Shall I just dump it out and be through with the detestable trick?"

"Motives, Johnie dear, motives only count. What you are bound to do now, you are doing for him, as well as for any one else. This is a world's war you know."

"Can't forget it even in sleep. I think I now dream in four languages. Last night it was celestial; that's a new one on me."

"You mean Far East?"

"No indeed. Heavenly. It was all draped up with wings and windings and fleecy clouds. Guess those biscuits Stella made must have inhaled some of her disposition."

Joan picked up the bag again.

She was unwinding the old bedraggled draw string. It had been wound and tied in a boy's way, tight and with the unslipable knot. Neither girl spoke, as they breathlessly awaited the outpouring of the contents. They disliked the operation, but it had to be gone through with. First came the inevitable photograph of "the girl." This was wrapped in a piece of oiled paper, and tied with a brown shoe string. The girls did not scrutinize it. Somehow it seemed unfair to do so. Joan replaced its wrappings almost reverently. Then came some American letters. They were from home, but the inscrip-

tion had been carefully removed, and throughout the sheet every spot, where his name must have been originally, had been punched out, evidently with a sharp knife.

"No chance to learn his identity," said Joan quietly. "I thought we might be able to decide on 'Roger'."

"Or my Tom. Or Mirabelle's Andrè."

"We might make it 'the boy of many names!' Myriad or—just plain Mixed."

"It would soon be Mixy, I guess." Valerie held the badly torn letter, Joan had just taken from its place of long hiding.

"What's this?" asked Joan, getting at a queer little bundle. It was tied, and wound and wrapped, first with oiled silk such as is used in hospitals, and then it had a covering of waterproof khaki cloth, evidently a piece torn from a coat. Next a brown handkerchief was unwound.

"Precious, surely," and Valerie bent closer in interest. "Be careful it doesn't—pop."

"No danger, it's just papers. I can feel them. But they must hold the secret."

All the wrappings carefully unwound left in the girl's hands bits of paper. Small bits they were, browned and soiled and torn, but the characters were clearly outlined. We cannot say they were written.

"Look what's this? Just red and black marks. Some sort of diagram."

"We can never decipher that," answered Valerie, who was now scrutinizing the queer characters. The paper was closely covered with marks, evidently not a map or diagram, but perhaps some sort of direction, marked in code. After a moment that slip was laid aside. The next was covered with row after row of figures, and they were not in any way explained or even added. This was also a puzzle to the girls.

"What do you thing it all means?" asked Joan with a note of concern in her voice.

"Have not the least idea," replied Valerie, "but I see no reason to be suspicious. Many messages have to be given in code."

"Oh, of course," and Joan was plainly relieved at her chum's show of confidence. "I have no fear but it is all right. That we do not understand it is no criterion of wrong. Look at this."

She held up a very much crumpled and torn slip of paper of good quality originally. On this were a few lines written in a strong masculine hand, and in English, Joan read aloud as she patched the bits together.

"But even a woman of the type you mention is not always to be—" There was a break, but the girls supplied the word "trusted." Then they made out the words "good soldier" and "fathom."

"Of course a warning about a woman," said

Joan. "Strange I cannot get that spy countess out of my mind."

"It is her threat evidently that bothers you. Threats and curses always do that; they 'stick around' as the boys say. But surely that is a warning about someone and the unknown quantity must be a woman. Is that all?"

"All but a little hard lump. It feels like a ring. I hate to open it."

"But we must make our investigation complete. Want me to take a hand?"

"If you would," and Joan passed the innocent little collection to Valerie. "Poor boy," she was thinking, "how hard it was not to be able to keep such a little thing as that bag in all this big world. Surely he must be a scout or refugee or——"

"Yes, it's a little ring," Valerie announced. "It must have been a child's. No initials in it. Well, that seems to be all. What do you make of it, Joan?"

"I can't see that we have anything to report. I think we had best put those papers away very securely and safely. Then, if we have any reason to use them, they will be obtainable. I have to go to Paris. I did not tell you, did I? I have to go to the official headquarters at Paris within three days. Shall you be glad to get rid of the erstwhile captain?"

"Johnie!" said Valerie indignantly. "But

what's the call? Or is it too official for me to comprehend?"

"Oh, no indeed. It is just to give a verbal report. Captain Seely could not get a satisfactory one written about the big tank you know. But that will give me a chance to put the papers in a safe deposit vault. Dad has a box, and I think I can indentify myself, and get to it. I may have to cable, of course."

"You are right to put the papers away out of danger. It would not do for us to keep them around us. We really don't know their significance. At the same time we could not turn them over to the Intelligence Department without their hounding the boy, perhaps unnecessarily. Not that we want to hide anything—" she stopped. It was confusing. The valor of their work demanded that absolutely no chance be taken with anything suspicious. But Joan quickly saw her unasked question.

"Don't worry, girlie. It is service first, and I shall take precious, good care that whatever is written in this little pile of scrawl gets to the proper authorities. But first I want to do a little sleuthing. If we gave up this now, it would spoil the plan I have in mind, and I feel that to follow it would be surest and safest for all hands. Don't think me foolish if I tell you I am going to try to find the boy. He cannot have gotten far with that leg, and if we find him he will surely explain, and let us help

him. I am certain he has a mission for our allies. These papers have been used a lot and carried far."

"Oh Joan!" exclaimed Valerie. "Just look at this little line we missed! It is in foreign writing."

Joan grasped the single one side of a torn envelope. On it were a few words written in fine foreign hand and the hand was plainly German!

"I know that slant," said Joan, "and I know the hand. Valerie, the Princess of the Cross Roads wrote that. I remember the hand well. It is peculiar. Hold it up to the light and we may make it out."

Trembling with excitement, both girls held the tiny slip out, one having either end. Sure enough, the faded ink showed the tracings when looked at through the light. The words were in English: "It must so be. Pray so arrange." Then on the very end partly torn off was part of a word. It was "forever."

"That last word was 'forever,'" said Joan. "What do you think she could have written to him for?"

"That woman would write to anyone," said Valerie without any special reason for saying so. She saw how disturbed her chum was about the last revelation.

"I know!" suddenly exclaimed Joan. "I'll bet she came down in the strange plane, and

then she wrote him about arranging something to suit her friend the Kaiser. She would certainly try to inveigle any soldier into her net. But she never got Roger, I am sure of that."

"Well, we will make the papers safe, and wait, as you say. We surely have some good work to do. This is getting deep."

"I wish you could go with me to Paris, Val. But I have to leave you in charge. It seems so queer for us to have such important work to do that I can scarcely realize it all. Just fancy you and I running this barracks!"

"Just fancy the boys running the front," replied Valerie. "I can't see why girls should not be trusted. It is simply that we have not had the courage to claim our own before. Let me kiss you, little Captain and wish you all the luck on earth. I know when you come back from Paris you will have the interpretation of our treasure bag contents. Until then——"

The drumming of a tin pail for supper call finished Valerie's sentence.

And presently there was no loss of appetite shown as a result of the secret conclave.

CHAPTER X

AN INVESTIGATOR

JOAN had gone to Paris, and the children had been brought back to the raided town. Mirabelle was delighted to be placed in charge of the little shelter, and the youngsters were so happy with their rag dolls, made by the Motor Corps Girls, and their books gathered in Paris by the same workers, that it was like a miniature institution that had been set up in the home of Mirabelle, and in the abandoned house next door.

Of course, Louise was the moving spirit. She insisted on being the real mother, and indeed, she knew very well how to handle successfully the queer mixture in a colony of children left destitute.

The autumn or "little winter" was in the air, and few flowers now braved the winds, and threatening shadows. As all small French towns are built, this was a colony thickly settled with small stone houses, grouped in a sort of

circle, and only far out away over the hills, could one see the farms, and the gardens. It appears the homes were thus built closely together for protection, as even in times gone by France was often visited by the invader.

Valerie and Georgia Stevens had brought in the supplies. Here again Mirabelle was the proud proprietor. And it was apparently very safe to trust the precious supplies to her experienced hands, for war, hardship, and privation had added much to her natural ability as a housewife. Everyone knew the Nurse Mirabelle in those parts, and now the training of the good old French woman was standing in good stead with the plans of the Motor Corps Girls. She could do efficiently what they directed, and they called her "War Mother."

"Mere, Mere!" Louise was calling. "An officer is here. He asks for the captain."

"Mirabelle is the captain here," rejoined the woman proudly as she met the buttoned and striped officer at the door. "What is it I can do for the officer?" and she bowed civilly, but not without keeping her grey head held high.

"It is the young captain of the Motor Corps I am looking for," replied the man in French. "I have a message for the Babies' Shelter."

"This is the Babies' Shelter and I am in charge of it," insisted Mirabelle. "Of what is the message? About more children? We had expected some from the Beaucourt."

"No, it is not that. But it is for an inquiry. We must know about—some report. Where can I find the Motor Corps' captain?"

"This is not headquarters," replied Mirabelle. Her tone alone made up for the rudeness of her words. She felt she had a real Shelter there, and why should it be mistaken for a mere Motor Corps Headquarters?

Just then Valerie happened along. She had been unloading the car over at the "auxiliary." Seeing the officer she saluted, and he returned the recognition. Mirabelle indicated that Valerie would now take up the matter with him, and she marched off in fine "right-about."

"Mam'selle," he began.

"Oui," she replied.

"Oh, American, good," he exclaimed. "I am on home ground now."

"Yes, I am Lieutenant Warde of the Motor Corps," promptly replied Valerie. Her voice indicated her own pleasure at the prospect of conversing with an American. Of course, he was good looking, all our officers are that, and he was young and radiant with splendid health. At a glance Valerie had noticed all this, for his head was thrown back in such a fine poise, and his eyes fairly sparkled with interest.

"This is better luck than I expected. Our togs make us all look alike, but they can never mix us up on the tongues. Sometimes I wonder if the folks back home would recognize me be-

hind all these trappings," he touched the trimmings of his uniform, and smiled quizzically.

"But they stand the wear," Valerie reminded him. "I am always glad that the uniforms were enlisted for the 'duration.' We don't have to worry about new styles."

"That's something," he agreed. "But can't we sit down? He looked about the small patch of cleared ground that Louise had so industriously swept clean with her switch broom.

"There's a bench over here," Valerie told him, and she felt they were getting far from official lines. The small talk sounded quite like something social at home.

"That will be first rate, also out of ear shot," he remarked. "Lieutenant Warde, I represent the Intelligence Department. I have been sent to get a report about the finding of the tank."

"Our captain has gone on to Headquarters in Paris to make such a report," Valerie almost interrupted.

"But I had to come and get it on the ground. You see, we have a lot to clean up, and from what I hear you young ladies may be of help."

"I am sure we shall be glad to." Then Valerie wondered if it would be safe to trust him without knowing him personally, or having some strong voucher, or seeing such credentials as could not be questioned. She knew that a mere uniform could not be trusted. As if he sensed her attitude of question, he said quickly:

"I left my car over there," pointing to a field where the car could be seen stationed. "My men are looking over the ground."

"Oh, I see," acquiesced Valerie. "But I am afraid I have little additional information. Our captain has taken it all to Paris."

"That was strictly about the tank, was it not?"

"Yes; the finding of it."

"But was there a scout about here lately?"

Now Valerie was puzzled. What should she say to that question! Would it be dangerous to say anything about the boy?

"A scout?" she repeated, marking time, and baiting for further information. It would be best to find out, if possible, what he knew.

"First-rate chap with a game leg," continued the officer.

Still she hesitated. "We find so many just like that," she said finally with a smile that complimented the boys she was referring to.

"Oh, of course. Sometimes I envy the fellows who can go out, and get all shot up, and then get sweetly nursed," he said boyishly. "We poor 'follow ups' never have such luck."

"All lines in a day's work!" Valerie reminded him.

"Well this is pleasant, but I must be on my way with the job," and he jumped up. "Really can't you just tell us all about it, and give Uncle Sam a lift?"

"I'm here for service, and shall be only too glad to help you," said Valerie with sudden gravity. "But I do not know how I can assist."

"Suppose we go over the field, and you may be able to point out just how you discovered the hidden tank."

"As you please," she answered, whereas he gave a shrill whistle. The car that had been standing farther out, was quickly driven up to him.

But Valerie did not jump in. How queer it would be if they drove off with her, Valerie was thinking. She did not forget her intensive training to be "discreet and prudent."

"We have to go to the barracks that way, and I'll take the girls back as we travel," recommended Valerie. "There are only four of us."

Georgia had been waiting her summons.

"Private Stevens we will follow"; she hesitated as she did not know his name. But even then he did not offer it, so she continued—"We will go over to the tank field on our way back. The officer wants us to show him the ground as we discovered it."

Georgia was at the wheel instantly, and the officer smiled broadly when he observed he was not to be treated to the further pleasure of a ride with Valerie. "No getting away with those Khaki Girls," he was thinking. He was a human man in spite of the war.

The girls noted that the driver of the officer's

car wore the regular uniform and was beyond doubt genuine. This bore out the young officer's claims, of course, though just why Valerie should have looked for proof of his standing, was not clear even to herself. Somehow the territory about the lost tank abounded in strange possibilities. Or, was it the sudden disappearance of the boy from the cottage that had aroused her suspicion? The officer had not pressed his question on that score.

Presently the two cars sped through the rough fields, as only such service cars could cover the ground. One would think the motors knew the way, or, as the girls said, were guided by mysterious patriotic hands. In front of the half-hidden tank they halted.

"Like old times to have people to interview," remarked the army man. "I used to work for the Department of Justice."

"Oh, really!" Valerie could not help exclaiming. "So did our little captain."

"In a few well-chosen sentences," as the newspapers would say, Valerie told something of Joan's work in helping to capture the spies.

"We must meet her," enthusiastically replied the investigator. "She may be the girl referred to." This last was said without any further explanation. When, where, and what was the reference made to? Valerie wanted to ask, but again her training asserted itself. She choked back her curiosity and kept silent.

Next, the girls were asked just how the discovery of the tank was made, who came upon it first; how they happened to be looking or digging in that field; who uncovered the crudely scratched letters on the front of the giant machine, and so many questions that Valerie, experienced though she was, felt like a witness at a court martial trial. Everything she said was carefully written down in the officer's book, and finally, he took a number of photographs of the tank and its surroundings. Valerie knew positively now he must be authorized, otherwise he could not have carried the camera.

Just why the old tank should be so important the girls could not guess, although the military men did mention exactly what Captain Seely had written; namely that the men lost with the tank were to have been decorated for bravery.

After every stone, and every old stump been turned over, and all the earth about the ruins explored the officer thanked Valerie and Georgia, (they were the only ones who took part in the "drill") and offered to escort the motorists out of the woods. This offer was refused with genuine thanks for Valerie had concluded that the intelligence men were all that they claimed to be, nevertheless she did not require any personal attention such as an escort.

"We may call at the barracks," he said. "Have to get all the dope on this," he smiled good naturedly as he used the familiar slang.

It would have sounded stilted to have said, "get all the information" when the good little word "dope" meant so much more.

"Very well," Valerie replied. "The captain will be back tomorrow."

CHAPTER XI

A MESSAGE FROM THE CLOUDS

"STAND to, girls! We are still the Trusty Twenty!"

It was First Lieutenant Warde who gave the word. And the Motor Corps Girls, twenty in number, (a 'sub' was in Joan's place) stood as if in drill line outside Windsor Barracks; but the determined look on the face of each, and the squared shoulders brought up to fighting form told another story than that of drill. It was action! The front had been blazing, the guns roaring, the planes droning and the earth spewing for miles around.

"We will have orders shortly," the lieutenant said. "Be in absolute readiness. Take no unnecessary risks, but do your best. Look out for the old trenches, they are not covered up. The whole road is torn and upturned. You will stop at the first dressing station. The stretcher bearers will give you our men there. We may have to use first aid. Have everything ready."

Each girl touched her cap in response. Each girl would have to do her best, and each would bravely carry that responsibility the U. S. A. had entrusted her with.

A car carrying the flying Red Cross came tearing down the improvised road. It was the expected messenger. A sealed packet was handed to Valerie. She took it, dismissed the messenger with a brief word. These were her orders. She was now acting captain, for Joan had not returned.

In spite of the surrounding dangers, and the urgency of that hour, Valerie could not crush back a longing for brave little Joan. What had become of her? Where was she in the big Paris catastrophe of the day before?

The next instant the girls had mounted their ambulances and, every car "manned" to full capacity, they were off for the front.

Valerie led as captain. Planes were driving overhead, Red Cross ambulances were dashing by on the road, and the whole world seemed to to be in one terrific uproar. Little humanity scarcely counted against such gigantic forces as were working, yet it was little humanity that propelled the entire action.

Valerie, handsome as a major, her khaki simply affording a back ground for her dark beauty, only showed her ardor by the heightened flush of her cheeks.

Not far from the First Aid dugout the motor

detail halted. All along for the space of a mile the drivers had been challenged by guards and sentries, but, accustomed to such inquiries, the girls replied quickly, so that their progress was not seriously interferred with.

One guard gave the orders for distance between the ambulances, and another checked up the coming and going. In all of this, the greatest work man or woman has ever been called upon to perform, few words were spoken. Orders were so concise as to sound metallic. How intensely every heart and every mind was concentrated on the relief—the solace for the *blesses!*

At the field station the litters came so quickly that it was difficult to place the stricken, and wounded in the cars, in time to make room for the others in line. But how the girls worked! How they administrated to the agonies of those who must wait for miles to be covered before the base hospitals could be reached. Some must "go West" on the way, but even Lottie, the Baby of the Regiment, was equal to the occasion and had given comfort and actual relief to one of the wounded who was bleeding too profusely to make his life worth much for the critical moments.

Contrary to the usual plan Valerie, as captain, waited until last to have her car filled. She had commissioned Georgia Stevens as senior to lead the others.

"Just a moment captain," said the guard. "We have a man here, injured as he came along with orders. He was shot while on duty in the advance."

The stretcher bearers came up with a form on the litter, differently uniformed from those who had been in the fight. He was a young lieutenant and instantly Valerie recognized him. Her officer from the Intelligence Department! How could he have gotten to the front since he had left them a few days ago! and why was he out of his own department? Then, as she looked down at him, she saw he was not too badly injured to recognize her. He returned her glance with something like a smile, she then recalled he had been an official messenger.

"Different?" he managed to say. "But all in a day's work," he finished, quoting her words to him at their first meeting.

Two other wounded men were brought to her ambulance, and placed beside the lieutenant, then she started. All the wounds had been dressed at the station, so that she could proceed now without further delay.

Planes were still passing overhead, but they were not of the enemies. The battle had worn down to an occasional fire that seemed almost accidental in its isolation. It had been a wonderful victory for the Allies, and had marked a turning point in the great war. Again, mere man could not count in so tremendous an oc-

currence, yet it was every last "mere man" who had won the great fight.

Now the planes were evidently accepting and sending messages as they gracefully swayed back and forth, and Valerie noticed one seemed to keep over her car for a considerable distance.

"That plane seems to be keeping track of us," she remarked to Edna Black who was beside her.

"I have been watching it," replied Edna. "Don't you think it is coming down?"

The whirr of the motor could be heard more plainly each moment. Yes, the big machine was descending. Presently it shot ahead and dropped something. As the object touched the earth there was a light puff as from white powder.

Instantly the plane shot overhead again, and before Valerie had recovered from her surprise the battle bird was off with its flying companions.

"That must be a message for us?" she said. "Drive slowly."

"It may be a bomb?" objected Edna.

"That was our plane," Valerie insisted. "They may have dropped the puffy thing to make sure of our attention. Here we are. Let us get it whatever it is."

Nimbly she jumped out. A slight cloud of powdery dust was still rising from the object

in the road. She kicked over a broken hollow ball. Beneath was a smaller sphere. Picking this up somewhat gingerly Valerie knew it contained a written message.

She sprang back into the car with the remains of the "bomb" in her hands. Edna let in the clutch, and Valerie glanced in the car to see if her men were as comfortable as they could be made while en route. Two of them seemed to be dozing, and the lieutenant was smoking a cigarette. His one unbandaged hand appeared quite vigorous, as it clung to the side rail. Plainly he was not badly wounded. The others were resting after the first aid treatment which could have included a sedative.

"What is it?" demanded Edna shrinking away from the inoffensive ball with its rolled message.

"I'll see directly. I was afraid the stopping of the car might have disturbed our patients."

When pressed, the inner crust cracked as if it had been charged. Even Valerie jumped a bit and Edna exclaimed her unfailing "Mercy!"

"That was just to hold it in tight," explained Valerie. "No stronger than seltzer."

The paper rolled out as she crushed the ball. This too had been "loaded" so it would be sure to hold in place.

Shaking off the debris Valerie said, "Those boys are certainly efficient. I wouldn't won-

der if they would soon succeed in collecting smoke for fumigation."

But Edna could not joke, she was all eyes on the paper. Valerie smoothed it out on her lap. Then her own eyes widened.

"Joan!" she exclaimed. "Our Joan is injured! She is at Hospital No. 16." Then she dropped the unwelcome little message. She stared straight ahead.

Came a voice from the back of the ambulance. "Got a live match around you girls? Mine missed fire." The lieutenant loved to smoke.

CHAPTER XII

THE END OF A BIG DAY

THAT drive to the hospital seemed interminable. Even the occasional call from the young lieutenant, who, being only slightly, nevertheless, helplessly injured, insisted on keeping up the spirits of the party, those good-natured quibs failed to evoke a ripple from Valerie and Edna. It was Joan! Joan was injured and no one knew how seriously.

Besides this there was no hope of Valerie going to see her, for now the Corps must be captained by Valerie.

Back to the barracks they finally drove, not caring just how soon the trip would be completed. Edna asked questions, and Valerie answered listlessly, but the one big question loomed up before them like a huge dangling black fury, that would neither dispell nor move from that line in front of the car.

"I wouldn't have believed I could have experienced such a shock at the simple message,"

pondered Valerie. "I can't see now why I am so blue. She may only have a nerve shock, like our good-natured lieuty."

"It's because it is—Joan," replied Edna, and they both knew that was the correct answer.

"They may have the details at the barracks," Valerie ventured again. "But I can't see just why Joan sent the message that way."

"Yes, wasn't it queer? How do you suppose the airman knew us from that height?"

"I don't suppose they did know us, but they saw we were a motor corps and that was enough. If the message had been intended for someone else, they knew we would deliver it."

"Oh, of course," and again there was a silence save for the whirr of the rolling car. Over the hills, evening was caressing the soft, billowy world, like tired playmates folding arms together. Even the war clouds were subdued, and the noise of guns almost silenced.

"It is wonderful to be able to do our work in daylight," remarked Valerie. "I wonder when it will all be over?"

"I wonder!"

Through the camouflaged road, made of transferred trees, the girls were now winding their way. Just a few more turns to the barracks.

"A strange car!" remarked Valerie, coming in sight of the home drive.

"There are two of them," added Edna, for

two earth-colored autos stood at the end of the narrow road near the barracks.

"Maybe they have sent us a new captain. Let's hurry a little. I wonder were we creeping. I had hardly noticed." Valerie grew agitated.

"Oh, Lieutenant Warde," began Captain Seely, who was waiting for them as they came in. "Do you know anything of Captain Mason?"

"Yes, just this," and with a salute Valerie handed over the message from the sky. All faces were serious. Those of the girls who were in the room did not interrupt with so much as a glance. The captain finished reading the line, but showed no surprise.

"I felt she was in that raid!" she said. "We left her going in the direction of Beaucourt. It was only a few minutes before the visit of Bertha's bombs." A sneer crossed her face as she spoke of the German gun that had been bombing Paris. "But we could not find her. How strange that she should have been taken to that hospital when the other was so much nearer. Well, no telling why. But we were lucky to get the message to-night. I understand why they had to send word that way. The hospital service out there was completely crippled and there was no chance for city messengers."

"Was she in the raid, do you think?" Valerie managed to ask.

"Undoubtedly. But we can count on our little Joan. She was never in it alone. Likely she was holding on to a parcel of babies, or a knot of old ladies when she was hit. I don't believe any bomb could have found her of its own accord."

It was splendid to hear the captain's expression of her high regard for Joan. The little stricken group could scarcely have seemed more afflicted if something really serious had been announced to them. As it was, Joan might be almost all right, but simply not able to travel.

"Now, don't all look like a funeral," reprimanded Captain Seely. "What about all the boys injured to-day? Of course, I know how you feel. She was so much to you, and this little family is very affectionate."

"We are acting like babies," Valerie flushed. "Joan would scarcely thank us for such weakness."

"But I know how it is," said Captain Seely, and at each word she went deeper into the hearts of her corps. "You have been working at such a high tension that it does not take much to knock you out. Just like little kites. Let you soar and all is well, but a tiny pebble can put a wonderful kite out of business. Well, I must be getting back. I have a military escort and he will be impatient. I shall let you know directly I hear about our little Joan. In

the meantime, I know I can count on the Joan brand of service."

The corps saluted gravely.

"I have left orders at the desk, Lieutenant," to Valerie. "I may be able to run in again to-morrow. You did wonderfully to-day. We have had high praise from everyone. Good-bye, and be happy."

Left to themselves the girls all wanted to talk at once. They each seemed to feel that the message from the clouds should be forced to give out more information than the poor, feeble little words could be made to divulge. Over and over again Valerie and Edna explained just how the planes acted, how one hovered over them, and how the practice bomb, of white chalk and paper had been dropped in front of their car, with the puff as a signal.

"And we had the nicest lieutenant," said Edna. "Wardey knew him, didn't you, Val?"

"He's the chap from the Intelligence Department. You remember him girls? The one who cross-examined us about the tank," and she did flush because they were all looking at her so intently. The incident brought out a laugh from Lottie. She wanted to weave a little romance all about the joking lieuty, and acting captain, but the joke didn't catch on very well. The strict discipline of the service was only occasionally parodied in this way, and, after such attempts, the usual result was a very

flat failure. For wounded men and boys, and tired, faithful girls, have a world all their own, and in this world war, little mirth could be injected.

"Where do we go from here?" asked Valerie finally, which was the question asked in lieu of "is it bed time?"

"Boots off anyway," suggested Georgia, "and then you two late ladies may eat. We have kept you the best little meal you ever tasted in the way of real, home, French cooking. Marcelle wouldn't even let us know what it was made of, but it tasted like the Peace Proclamation," so saying, the capable Georgia hastened to arrange on the wall-built table, the meal thus described.

"I shall be seeing practice bombs bursting all night," said Edna, who still showed some nervousness. "And I shall never forget how those words looked coming out of the cloud of blowy smoke."

"Oh, let's brace up," suggested Valerie. "Tomorrow we may have a lovely trip to Paree." She would love it for a change.

"Not thinking of the lieutenant who was so slightly injured that the damage did not effect his funny bone, are you?" teased Lottie. "I adore a boy who can joke in an ambulance. Why was I not on your buggy, Val?"

"I'll give you a joker next time, Lot. I hear you had a bad half-hour with your friend."

"Yes, he wanted to get out. He was delirious of course. Poor boy! But it was shock mostly. He may be all right soon. I hope so. I'm like the air men, superstitious. I believe all my men will recover if a bird flies straight over the car. No, I don't believe a bird is a sign of the West. I love birds, whether feathers or humans, Frenchies or Sammies."

"I had a queer experience to-day," put in Georgia. "A woman ran out of a home-made dug-out, and stood straight in front of the car. I thought she was trying to warn us of something, but after waving us to a standstill, she simply asked for a ride to Paris. Can you beat that?"

"Maybe wanted a new chapeau or something," suggested the sandy-haired Doris Gaffney.

"Hats, of course, would be your guess, Dor. Now I believe the woman wanted a cake of soap. I know they need soap desperately."

So the girls gradually reacted from the high-tensioned pitch of a hard day's work, and the report of the injury to Joan. What a wonderful thing it is to be a young girl! The proverbial little duck that went through all the pages of history shaking water off his back has "nothing on" the temperament of a healthy young girl. She does not even have to give "a shake" to toss off her troubles, they just slither away and there you are!

Darkness found the motorists all in their bunks. And the bunks soon found them all sweetly sleeping. Valerie dreamed of Joan, and the treasure bag being carried up in the practice bomb, that had brought down the message.

CHAPTER XIII

WHAT HAPPENED TO JOAN

"WE are detailed to Red Cross Hut," announced Valerie the following morning, after she had taken and read the day's orders sent by messenger, or service runner. "We get the cars at St. N—— and carry the men from the train to be fed at the hut. All ready by seven sharp."

That would be an early start, but having had no night duty, and thus able to get a good rest, the corps, to a girl, felt sufficiently refreshed, and ready for new conquests. Privately Valerie was delighted with the prospect of a day's work around Paris, for that would bring her near enough the hospital where Joan was quartered, to afford some possibility of communication with her.

The relief divisions were being brought out to the fields of war, and the "vets" or those who had been long engaged, were being invalided into rest camps. This necessitated the canteen

service of the Red Cross being run at top speed, so that the motor corps were summoned from all available points to help with the transportation.

"Oh, it's jolly to help at the hut," exclaimed Lottie, who made no secret of being glad to get away from the litter work. "Now, Val, maybe I'll find a laughing lieuty!"

"Hope you do, girlie. Now all aboard. I want to be at headquarters when the whistle blows."

It was the usual hazy French morning of early fall. Leaving the barracks the girls were able to drive as all light cars do, through the woods for the shortest cut, and this left them clear of the roads over which the cannions were now rumbling. The cannions are the huge supply wagons like the big "Gipsy wagons" of the supply divisions we have so often seen in our own streets on their way to the nearby camps. To encounter a convoy of those army trucks always meant delay, so that, to get to Paris quickly, and thence out for the hut work, Valerie led the way through the woods.

Every girl was humming a tune. If the birds could not exactly recognize the cadence, being French birds and American girls, it is positive all the Guardian Angels knew them to be songs of Service and Praise. It was good to be alive, and lovely to be able to Carry On.

At the crowded station the girls were soon

awaiting their turns to fill the cars, those having been assigned to them at Red Cross Barracks. These ambulances were built with the side seats, and held eight men, a double quartette filing in as smoothly as if passed in through shoots from the waiting trains. The boys were so glad to get that far—and with a canteen in sight, Red Cross at that, tended to keep spirits high. All of which was infectious, and the Motor Corps Girls being dangerous carriers of any such infection as a good time, put the transport detail on par with a restricted picnic. Even Lottie reported that she had not only found one laughing lieuty but a regular brigade of such.

"If we had only some way of collecting souvenirs," she said, "Edna, I think next war I shall ask for white cuffs and good sharp lead pencils in our equipment."

"Or, we might be allowed to carry nice, smooth cakes of wax, and take impressions from the military buttons. My suggestion is as practical as the white cuffs of Lottie," said Nettie Black.

Doris Gaffney and Georgia Stevens were loading and unloading as quickly as service would allow. They were trying to win out on carrying the greatest number of men, that is, making the greatest number of trips from station the canteen.

At time to "grab grub" which was literally just what that term implied, the girls delayed

long enough in the canteen to exchange notes with one and other. Valerie, between a sandwich and a cup of coffee, managed to tell Georgia that she had arranged with Captain Seely for time off to get to Hospital No. 16 where Joan was quartered. Georgia was to be in charge of the corps while Valerie made the trip, so that directly after grub or chow (depending on one's division—all being the same food), she left the flying squadron and motored out to the hospital.

At the prospect of soon seeing her chum, Valerie experienced again some of the anxiety she had felt the day before. To those two girls it meant more than words could tell to be separated after all their months of intimate service. They had grown like twins, Joan often remarked, and Valerie now realized the strength of the simile.

No trouble in getting past the guards at the hospital, the motor uniform was a passport to most restricted territories.

And there was little Joan in a white bed, all in white, but not with the proverbial white face. Not much! Joan was red cheeked, and dimpled, and all but laughing. She wanted to get out, and she told Valerie so, almost before she had lost time on another single word.

"Think of it. Me here and all that's going on outside! I'm not a bit hurt. It's all nonsense."

"It doesn't look all nonsense, Joan. Why the bandages?"

"Oh, just cuts. I'm a bit cut up, if you must know the horrible details, Val."

"I really must. If I went back to camp without them I should be court-martialed. What happened?"

A sharp glance, as a nurse passed, gave Valerie the cue to wait till all was clear, then Joan told the story of the Paris air raid, and what it had done to her.

"You know, Valley, dear, I was just bent on getting the—to the—" (pauses indicated the words "papers" to the "safety vaults") and I was so glad it had been all accomplished satisfactorily, when the Bertha began to drop her puff balls. Honestly, Val, I don't believe they came from a gun in the woods at all, but I think they came from a plane overhead, for they dropped with that whirr the men call a grounder. You know how differently the shells sound when they are going to hit near. Well, mine came that way, and I ducked, of course, to dodge the shrapnel. As I dropped someone walked on me, and when I could look up, I saw a woman running along with a lot of children, and the woman frantically driving them on. And they all could run, too."

The afternoon nourishment was passed at this point. Val remembered how in the home hospitals the trays were passed at regular in-

tervals and she urged Joan to take her buttermilk.

"Just for the complexion," Joan agreed. "Buttermilk is not a specific for mere scratches."

"Then," she continued, as the nurse stepped into the corridor, "those children were actually driven into a dark alley. I kept right on after them, by now realizing something was wrong, for they should have ducked for shelter immediately the alarm was given. Every one seemed to have left the streets, for the shells were scattering in all directions, and there we were, running along like a let-loose Fresh Air Fund. But this is where you must shiver, Val, for I am creepy now when I tell it. Do you know, that woman was insane? When we got to a door, a trap door at that, she shooed the little crowd down, and dropped down herself, but she was not counting on Johnie. I was right at her heels. For a moment she glared at me, as a dog would if one attempted to attack its master. She had something sharp and rusty and it could cut. She said I was trying to steal her children, and by that time I knew she had gone mad!"

"Mercy, Joan! And you were alone in a cellar with a mad woman!" exclaimed Valerie, who was more excited at listening than was Joan at telling of the tragic event.

"No, not alone. I had all the youngsters along. And when they found I was their

friend— Well, I had a very wild woman to fight for a few minutes," and Joan straightened out her bandaged hands.

"And that is how you got all torn up?"

"Of course, she just literally tore at me with her old tin knife and even tried biting. That's why I am being kept here, to make sure I am free from poison. But Val, I have to get out. Do you realize I locked the woman in the cellar and then I tumbled out into the street with the babies dragging after me, and now they can't find the cellar I locked the poor woman in? That is, they had not found it this morning. You see, I do not know the names of the streets in the suburbs, and, in fact, I was rushing along so I could hardly tell where I went. But if I could be allowed to cover the trail again, I am sure I could pick out that blind alley. Suppose she should starve?"

"Wasn't it near enough any place for her cries to be heard?"

"I haven't any idea. You see it was so terribly wild while it lasted I did not stop, look or listen. I just had to fight."

"My, what a dreadful experience!"

"It sounds worse to tell, perhaps. It was just the usual escapade. Only it put me out of commission temporarily."

"That speech is distinctly Joanesque. It was not much, of course, to save a whole troupe of

babies from a mad woman. Do they know all about it here?"

"Well, I told them about the cellar—that is, I said I knew a woman was locked in by accident. You see I espied a door in the darkness and I pushed her inside. She had been tearing and scratching, and Val, she was the loveliest looking woman! Really she was nothing short of beautiful."

"Have you any idea whom she might be?"

"Not the slightest. But I want to get out and make sure she has been rescued. It seems to me everything moves so slowly when one is anxious to move and can't."

"That's true," agreed Valerie. "But your bites and scratches! Lucky she did not get at your face."

"Oh, they will be all healed in a few days. How have you been getting on and what did you think of my air service message?" she followed quickly. Then not waiting for a reply, she continued: "You see service here was laid off in the raid, and I knew you would be anxious, so I inveigled a nurse into giving the message to an airman who had been calling on a friend. He said it was his turn to fly to the lines, and I knew you would be on duty along that sector. So that is how I managed. How did you get it?"

When Valerie told her part of the story, she omitted to paint the gloom that had descended

with the message in the practice bomb, and, of course, in her report for the work of the corps, she omitted no item of interest, not even failing to tell of the Laughing Lieuty, as the good-natured chap of the slightly wounded casual had been styled.

"Ask the nurse if I can leave to-morrow," begged Joan, as Valerie prepared to go. "If I don't get out and make sure my dear little dark-eyed, insane woman is rescued I really shall be sick. You see, there is much to do, and so many trying to do things that it is next to impossible to get any definite information. She may have been found yesterday, but I have no way of finding out what happened after they brought me here. Ask the nurse if I may go to-morrow!"

"If the doctor says so," was the reply that functionary made to Valerie, and the chums were thus obliged to part on the uncertainty.

CHAPTER XIV

THE LAUGHING LIEUTY

BUT honors never come without attendant responsibility. No sooner had the report of Joan's fine work, in saving the children become known, than the Paris Headquarters asked she be transferred to Paris!

"But I came over for the Windsor Unit, and I feel I can do so much more in the field than in the city," Joan was imploring Captain Seely. "Don't you think you could beg me off!"

"Few young ladies would disdain the honor," replied the captain, "but I know how you feel. Of course, I am very proud of your work, for not only did you rescue those babies, but you undoubtedly saved Lady H— from personal injury. She so suddenly lost her mind, and had shown such efficiency while she had been in charge of the Shelter, no one had any idea of the danger. Her family has asked to be allowed to meet you personally, but I felt you would rather remain with the corps than stand

out individually in any of your achievements."

"Thank you, Captain," Joan replied. "To have served is all we ask. Fancy the boys being thanked individually for their work!"

"The right spirit, of course. But now as to the Paris commission. I shall have to confer with Captain Armstrong. They have special need of young girls, not too young to use common sense with prudence. But I do feel you should be left at Windsor, if it is possible to arrange it so without detriment to the division. You see, the Paris air raids have brought us a new problem. Folks have lost their heads in some sections, while in other parts of the city it is remarkable what composure is shown even during a raid. All of which gives us the motor work heavier than before. Folks who stay indoors become sick, folks who run around in danger, get hurt. In either case it means a car. Now my dear little Captain," and the elder woman took the hands of Joan as she stood to leave the hospital. "I hope they will allow you to go back to your beloved barracks to-morrow morning. As soon as I get to it I shall run out with the ultimatum. Meanwhile, be good, take care of yourself, even proxy captains are scarce," and the captain was off to the fields of labor that nowadays seem to have no quitting whistle to blow. All signals seemed to mean starting, none finishing.

So the lovely little woman whom Joan im-

prisoned was a titled lady! She had been taking care of the orphaned babies on her country estate and at the sound of the guns had suddenly lost her mind.

Captain Seely had told Joan how Lady H— had been found exhausted and all but unconscious in the cellar where Joan had made her secure. Her torn clothing and lacerated hands gave a story of severe fighting, but, fortunately, she had not harmed herself seriously. Of course, as quickly as the children were missed from the playgrounds an alarm was sent out, but the demented lady had made such progress in her wild adventure, that all trace of her was lost, far away from the district she had reached.

"I should love Paris if all the Windsor girls could be with me," Joan was debating with herself, "but I should pine away without Val and the others. Besides, I love those woods, it seems so much nearer the front out there, even if they do make a front of Paris I shall always feel the real 'top' is over the hills."

Another caller was announced. This time an officer. Joan was in the little reception room, and when the young lieutenant from the Intelligence Department was shown in she had no way of knowing he was the Laughing Lieuty of Lottie's dream.

"I hope you will not be disturbed by a few questions, Captain Mason," he began. "I should liked to have waited until you were dismissed,

but as I have to move along, I must cover the Paris end to-day."

"Oh, I am perfectly well, in spite of my bandages," replied Joan, "just a few scratches."

"I have heard of them," he answered significantly, "I shouldn't care for that particular brand. I am Lieutenant Murry of the Intelligence. I have met a number of your corps members, and what they have told me of the finding of the tank has been of inestimable value. But, of course, I have to have the report of the captain."

"I am not really a captain," corrected Joan. "I have only been commissioned to serve in an emergency. In fact, I am not a senior, but all the corps had to be shifted. However, I shall be glad to give you any possible assistance in the matter of information."

The little notebook and the big sheet of what looked like specifications, were produced simultaneously from the officer's pocket. Joan wondered what she could add to the details already given by Valerie.

"This tank," he began, "was of special value. Its crew were all stars. They had run wild out of the lines to follow a detachment of Boches that was out to get our advance patrol. You know, of course, that the advance stakes out for the barrage. Usually, when we chase that sort of a sniper we do it by hand, but this tank outfit had gotten a line on something new, and off

they went, and smashed in a whole consignment of pill boxes."

He paused, but saw that Joan understood that a pill box is the round concrete structure hidden in the ground in which the Germans placed machine guns.

"Well, after they busted the boxes, our lines fell in so quickly that we lost the baby tank. We were advancing as fast as the barrage could be shifted. But if our pet tank had not found that bunch of pill boxes, it would have been a different story."

"But you never heard from one of the crew?"

"Not from one. We watched for them, and sent out all sorts of scouts, but we could not even find out what became of the tank. Now we see what happened. A shell exploded so near and with such direct force as to bury the tank. The men dug themselves out as their crude message told, but what happened to them? They have not been found at any of the prison camps, but we cannot be sure until it is all over who, or how many may be in the enemy's hands."

"But we can be sure right now that not one is there who could get at his Boche," said Joan spiritedly. "Our men are not of the Kamerad brand."

"You are right, surely, but we are duty-bound to trace our men to keep the home pledges running. There is another reason why we are

so keen on the tank report. That is why *I* am in it. You see the Intelligence Department is like your Department of Justice, and I understand you have had some experience with that outfit."

"Yes, I had the opportunity to be with them in the states," said Joan simply. "I consider my training there of great value to me over here."

"So do we," said the Laughing Lieuty. "And that is why I am here this minute. You ran down the trick countess who called herself Hilda."

"You mean the girl who acted as traffic officer? We called her the Princess of the Cross Roads."

"That's the lady. Well, of course, you know she escaped?"

"Yes. She evaporated from my own ambulance. We thought her sick enough to last, but she must have had some very good resources hidden back of her yellow curls. She made a complete escape, we never saw or heard from her until she wrote me a tender little missive."

"Have you kept that?"

"Oh yes, among my German souvenirs. Besides, I must save it to be mindful of the threat. She said she would 'get me' as the boys say. Only her choice of words was really pretty. And she never left out so much as a comma in the letter. I love the way our foreign 'friends'

write, but I can't say I love their guttural tones."

"Might I see the letter?"

"Certainly," replied Joan. "But I have no papers here." She stopped suddenly. Her papers were in the safety deposit box out in Paris. And she would not allow any one, not even this seemingly trustworthy officer, of the Intelligence Department go to that box!

"When can you get the letter?" asked the lieutenant.

"As soon as they give me my leave ticket. I hope they will not find some other scratch to cauterize to-morrow."

"Cauterize?" repeated the man. "Oh, I see, you had a bad time with poor Lady H— That was a close shave."

While they talked Joan's mind had been revolving around the adventure with the mystery boy. Every word spoken concerning the German countess and the tank recalled his part in the story. She wondered if the questioner would know anything of this mysterious young soldier, but she had no thought of asking him such a leading question.

The officer was referring to his notes. He folded the big paper which he had been scrutinizing, then read notes for a moment. Finally, he said: "Another point of interest and importance is that this spy countess had been known to have written notes to our men. She smug-

gled word to them somehow, always, of course, pretending to give them some very valuable information concerning their own salvation. A strange plane shot down out in those woods one day and got away. We have always felt it may have dropped a passenger. Seen anything strange in those diggings? Anything like—deserters?"

Joan's heart almost stopped beating. Could her hero have been a deserter?

"We found a man injured," she faltered, "and we cared for him at a hut. He was not in need of hospital treatment, and we were advised to allow him to rest there. He seemed a fine chap."

"What division or outfit?"

"He was always reluctant to talk about himself, so I can't tell; but he expressed the keenest interest in the progress of the Allies. There could be no question as to his loyalty," Joan felt justified in adding.

"What uniform?" again queried the officer.

"It was past recognition," and Joan laughed. "We called him a scout, and we were sure he was a marine, but he never admitted his identity. We knew that the marines had removed every mark of rank before getting into the danger of being taken prisoners."

"Yes, that was to fool the Boches on the information stunt. I shouldn't be surprised but the Frenchies will have a fine crop of Sam

Browne belts growing in their gardens next season. But what happened to the invalid?"

"He left—discharged himself. Of course, he was to leave as soon as he was able. We found him in a field, and he must have been wildly separated from his company. I don't blame him for being anxious to catch up," Joan mitigated.

But now came the test. Should she tell this man all she knew, and show him the stranger's papers? Would it spoil the plans of a perfectly loyal soldier, who was plainly bent on some important mission, or might she be doing a questionable thing in hiding any information?

"Safety first," she decided, then she knew she was going to give up the secrets of the treasure bag.

Joan was glad her inquisitor was young, agreeable and evidently good-natured. Had he been a great, important looking military man, she would have felt more difficulty in starting out with her strange revelation. It was no simple task to disclose her secret now. Neither did she feel she could wisely withhold the information longer.

She reasoned thus: "If I were with the Department of Justice, and had followed these various clues, I am sure I should expect my assistants to volunteer any additional information they might have, even though I was not just sufficiently wise to ask them the particular ques-

tions." This brought her to her conclusion, and immediately she had resolved she felt better!

"That's a sign of real wisdom," she finished, "and, here's to it!"

CHAPTER XV

A TEST OF SERVICE

"LIEUTENANT MURRY," she began bravely, "I feel I should intrust a matter to you which, until this moment, I felt to be one of almost sacred confidence."

"I shall try to live up to the trust," he said with a rare smile that had won for him the title of Laughing Lieuty.

"When we cared for the boy at the stone house," resumed Joan, "both Lieutenant Warde and myself realized he had some important business in hand. Something he could not discuss nor even hint at. We knew it might be a matter given to him under some rigid promise of fulfillment and that he had possibly not yet been able to—well, to bring it about, whatever it might be. Consequently, when we found him so anxious to leave us, and we have been so—so sort of chummy with him, we were disturbed, almost disappointed."

For the life of her Joan could not tell why

she stammered and she even feared she might be blushing. Wasn't it perfectly silly not to be able to tell a perfectly straightforward story? The officer simply looked at her, in his pleasant way, as if she had casually mentioned that it looked like rain, and it always looked like that in France. Then she focussed her next statement. It was intended to put the whole thing over quickly.

"When he left he gave the old French woman a note for me, asking me to get his treasure bag, from the abandoned supply station and burn the papers I should find in it."

"And you very wisely did nothing of the kind," helped out the lieutenant.

"Of course, I did not burn them, but I put them away safely. I felt he was anxious that they should not get under eyes they were not intended for. Still, I had not the slightest idea that he asked me to burn them in order to hide anything that should be known to the Allies."

"And where are these papers?"

"With the letter from the Countess. I have put them in my father's box in Paris. It was that I was doing when I was caught in the raid." She breathed a sigh of relief. She would never want any more service secrets.

"Do you suppose we might be able to get them to-morrow? I should be very grateful to you if we might go together to the vault, and get both papers you mention. I cannot say just

what may be the purport of this last matter. So many things may be involved. But like you, I prefer to think our boys are all true blue. This is a great war, and great measures have been used to prosecute it. Sometimes the humble doughboy is made the instrument of a mighty masterstroke."

Joan could have blessed him! He was on her side—on the side of her sad soldier who had crawled off with a badly aching leg!

"I am so glad you feel that way. If you could have seen the boy as we girls did, and have watched his moods, I am sure you would have interpreted them to stand for 'fight and finish,'" she said. "Our old Mirabelle, the French woman who cared for him, was very fond of him, and we have been told she could spot a spy in a battalion. She has served so long and faithfully, and had the opportunity of being in with some of the important families at the beginning. She was a nurse, and when war came she left her position in the country home of some notable family, and came back to her home town to be near those who would need her. They say Mirabelle has been an angel of mercy in that section," explained Joan doing justice to the service of Mirabelle.

"We have found so many cases of that sort," commented the intelligence man. "As a matter of fact, I believe the wonderful spirit shown by the elderly French women, is easily trace-

able to the splendid Joan of Arc schools they passed through in earlier life. Nothing like a good beginning. But about our vanishing doughboy? You say he went off, only leaving the note asking that you burn his papers?"

"That with a line—declaring he could not explain. I had told him once that I believed his mysterious work must be in conformity to some orders, and I had offered to help him without understanding. That is why he asked me to do so, I suppose. He must have felt I would keep—my word."

"And you managed to keep it without taking any chances. I call that first-rate work. Of course, your reputation 'beat you to it' here. You couldn't do otherwise than keep up the record."

Joan knew very well her cheeks would not behave. But if there was one thing more than another in her favor it was the attitude of her inquisitor. Perhaps, every single one of the young men in service were just as fine as her mystery boy, and this lieutenant, she hoped so. "Talk about the reputation of the motor corps girls," she was declaring secretly "they had nothing whatever on the boys."

"I am sure, we shall have some important clues when we get at the papers," went on Lieutenant Murry, "Likely they were all Greek to you."

"Oh worse than Greek. We did have a Soror-

ity at College, and I might have analyzed a Greek word or two, but that—Well, I shall be glad to go to the vault to-morrow, if you succeed in bribing that red cheeked nurse to let me go. I shall be everlastingly grateful to you if you get me out of this guard house. Not that they haven't treated me splendidly, but I feel like a tiger in a cage," Joan admitted.

"Trust me to get you out. I have already noticed the red-cheeked nurse, and I imagine she looked kindly in my direction. Shall I say I am obliged to have you at an investigation?"

"That would be technically correct, wouldn't it? We have to investigate the papers. But Lieutenant Murry," and she looked at him gravely, "can I exact a sort of promise from you? This is a very queer position I find myself in. I realize fully my duty to the government, and my duty to the young man who entrusted this matter to me. Now, to act fairly and above board with both parties is, you will admit, a difficult matter. Therefore, would it be ethical for you to assure me you will never do anything about those papers, unless by so doing you feel morally certain you will add something of real value to your service record? No matter how things look I have found that the strictly honorable course always leads to the way out; and in turning over those papers I am assured, but I want to be *doubly* assured,

that no harm will come through them to the soldier who entrusted them to me."

"Captain Mason, if you were a 'vet' you could not have made a better plea. I can assure you your friend of the treasure bag need have no fears from me. I came from his class, and I know his calibre. If he wants to—turn a trick that he feels he is capable of turning, I am his friend. I mean by that, he need not fear I shall spoil his work, if it is as I suspect. If, on the contrary, we find any evidence of—the other sort of work, there is no need to state where you and I stand."

"Thank you, Lieutenant Murry. I could be mistaken, of course, but the fact that a man wanted his most intimate belongings burned, because he could not take care of them, is no evidence that they contained anything incriminating. You, however, will be able to judge of that. Here comes our—nurse."

The lieutenant rose and walked away from Joan. The next moment he was importuning the nurse on the dire necessity for her letting Joan leave the hospital in the morning. But that white frocked dignitary was not smiling a "yes" Joan feared, Lieutenant Murry was urging. Finally he came back to Joan.

"It seems they are very fond of you here," he explained, addressing her. "I could not do more than have you paroled in my custody. Something about those scratches that may go

worse. And the nurse says the service needs you in perfect health. I must say I agree with her."

"Oh, what a nuisance," Joan surely felt like a prisoner now. "I can't see why——"

"Maybe orders from your own superior officers," suggested the lieutenant.

"I never thought of that. But Captain Seely seemed so anxious to get me back to the barracks."-

"Exactly; she wants you back in good shape. Well, I shall promise to take you for a lovely prom. to-morrow morning. Let the rest of the day follow. Thank you greatly for your help. I have not bagged as much game in a full moon. And all the sort that goes to make good records. That's the brand I love. Our spy countess did a lot of underhand work, but she had not reckoned on the counter strokes of the Motor Corps Girls. I feel we shall get her yet."

"So do I," said Joan warmly, "and I hope I shall be there at the getting."

He was preparing to go. Joan smoothed the bandage on her wrist. She was quite well decorated with the white stripes. In fact, it was her wrists, and hands that were most painfully wounded by the demented Lady H——.

"Hello! I see our traveling circus coming back," exclaimed the lieutenant, stepping back. "I believe that is the entertainment provided by the American stars, all Cohens. I hope they

allow you outside to hear it. I understand it is well worth listening to," said the lieutenant. "Well, until to-morrow, *au revoir*. And thank you again."

A commotion amounting to something like an uproar was "now going on" as the signs say. Joan knew it was the traveling entertainment provided for the convalescent soldiers. The strains of music, and call of voices arose from the street side of the hospital where, in a courtway the entertainers were staged.

"Can't I help?" begged Joan, as the nurses were hurrying to get men over to that side of the building, in touch with the programme.

"Can't use those hands yet," warned the head nurse pleasantly. "The blood must cool down completely before you undertake to pump it up again. But you may come along, and perhaps you will find something to do with your—feet."

"Certainly," agreed Joan eagerly. She knew she could help propel a chair with her feet, and possibly guide patients who were being physically assisted along by others.

How delighted the men were to hear the American songs, that were now pouring into the corridors and stealing in at the windows! The good, old comic street ballads we were, no doubt, just then spurning in the U. S. A. meant more than tonics to those men whose lives had been so suddenly pulled up by the roots, whose en-

thusiasm had suffered a jam of the brakes, and whose hearts were still throbbing so fiercely for action in service, and, of course, for health.

The entertainers were a group of men plainly out of fighting age, and with them were two young girls, wearing the uniform of the Service League.

Joan thrilled when a girl's voice rang out from below.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "that must be Nita Quinn. I should know her voice any place on earth. Nita always declared she would get across! And there she is! Yes," she was talking to the red cheeked nurse now, "that is a girl I knew in New York. I must speak with her. Do you think they will come in after the entertainment? Surely I can go down——"

"They usually come through the convalescent wards," replied the nurse. "Hasn't that girl a voice like a bird?"

"Oh, yes, that's Nita. I'm so excited. You see she is in Daddy's office. His private secretary. And now that she is here! I wonder how it is with Daddy?"

"They are only giving a short programme, as they are due to get farther front," said the nurse. "I believe they will stop after the toe dance. I'll speak to the young lady for you to make sure she does not jump in a car and dash off."

"You are a dear," exclaimed Joan, who had

noticed before how many little favors her nurse had obtained for her. After that incident the concert, as a whole, lost interest for Joan, and her attention centered on Nita Quinn. Why had Joan's Daddy allowed Nita to go into service? Not that he could have controlled her, if she had wished to enlist. He had not been able to stop Joan, and she had her own troubles in convincing him of the wisdom of her choice, but, why had he not written Joan about it? It would surely be a great change for him to have any one in the trusted and competent Nita's place.

"And I have not had a letter in the longest time," Joan was reflecting, in that old way of putting two and two together, when one of the twos would not fall into place.

"Here you are, Captain Mason," called the nurse. "I have captured your prize. And she was just going off to some better place to eat. We can't get a glimpse of the talent once they strike this end of the line. This way, Miss Quinn!"

The next minute, Joan and Nita Quinn, all the way from little old New York, were twined around each others' necks. It was so good to meet a girl just over! And so good to the other to meet a girl who was over long enough to know all about it! No wonder the meeting was "stagey" as the boys passing back to their wards remarked.

"Might have had another in sobs," said the boy who liked his new crutches so well he had given them pet names. "Maybe we can get them to do a turn after supper. I'll bet that little captain is a bird on her pins."

"Isn't it just wonderful!" Nita was exclaiming.

"How did you ever get here?" demanded Joan.

"K. of C. outfit, of course. I can dance every dance on the bill of fare. And do you know, Joan, we had to learn the Virginia Reel because so many of the boys can't dance at all, but can play at that. You should see the old service quarters turned into a drill school, and all the girls learning the Virginia Reel. Of course, we had an awful lot of stunts to go through to qualify for the band wagon. By the way, did you see ours? That piano is waterproof, all roofed and tinned by a good plumber. But Joan, can you guess who paid for it all?"

"Why no. Who did?"

"Your darling dad, of course. Haven't you heard?"

"Why no—" Joan gasped. "How could he go into that sort of work? And K. of C.?"

"We all went in together. Had one great big drive, five largest organizations in the War Camp Community. And your dear Daddy Mason promised, if I were accepted on my talents, of course, he would provide a special equip-

ment. And he gave me the Band Wagon. Isn't is great?"

"Yes," and Joan swallowed hard. Her daddy won over so completely as to help Nita get into service!

"And since he gave up the office——"

"Since he what?" asked the astonished Joan.

"Since he gave up the office!" She saw Joan's surprise. "Didn't you know about it?"

"No. I have not had a letter in so long."

"Well, girlie, you will not have a letter for 'so much longer,' for that dear daddykins of yours has gone and enlisted for the duration."

"Enlisted! Daddy!"

"Yes indeed. And he is now in Washington, in charge of the overseas service such as mine, and the last thing he told me was to mention the matter to you, should I run across you. Oh, Joan, dear, you are not the only patriot in your 'fambily,'" and Nita did a little stage stunt, to show her appreciation of the "fambily."

"But to think Daddy has joined the colors! After all the trouble I had trying to convince him I should enlist."

"That's just it. You converted him completely. Made a fine job of it. But what did you think of my stunt? Did you see the dance with fat little Lauder? We call him that just to compliment him. But he is very funny."

"After I heard your voice, Nita, I lost consciousness. I know the show was good, for the

boys were enthusiastic, but to be perfectly frank, all I heard was your voice. Doesn't that sound —like a lover's wail?"

"And you are always the same old lover. Joan, you have grown prettier——"

"Fen! no fair with that dope, as the boys say. This is war. And we are just part of the machine. But I might add you have not lost anything in the way of attractions yourself. I always adored your hair, and the same glint in your eyes! You know your eyes are topaz."

"And yours are sapphire. If Lauder were here we would call his emerald. For he has green eyes when he is mad. How do you like the uniform? If it were prettier it would never stand the gaff. We have some rough trips, you know. And Joan, dear, I have to be scooting. We are to give two more shows, and darkness comes apace. Isn't it 'crool' to part thus?"

"Crool" it might have been, but when the hospital boys who happened to be out for a breath of air, saw those two girls finally decide what would be the real, final, honest-to-goodness good-bye, they remarked:

"Some kids, those!" and the spirit of their happy half-hour lingered, as does the memory of some pleasant surprise. And as for Joan, the one little regret, that of having to leave her father to "worry over her work" had now been washed away. She was actually working under his command! He was a dollar a year man,

and his paymaster was none other than the Honorable Uncle Sam!

"I almost forgot all about the lieutenant and the papers," she was thinking, as she passed back into her own tiny corner where she was to spend at least one more night. "I love to go to bed with so many big things to think about——"

Don't you!

CHAPTER XVI

ON PAROLE

"FREE!"

"All our prisoners are glad to escape!"

"And I am sure you are just as glad to be rid of them."

"Not always. Once in a war moon we have someone who is really worth while holding. Now, you know you did help, and we are almost sorry you are leaving."

"That's sweet of you, as we say in New York. I am sure I gave you a lot of trouble feeding me, and waiting on me as if I were an infant. But wait until it is all over! I am going to propose such a wild reunion that we will be able to gather in from the four corners all the girls who have helped. Then, Nursie, I hope we will be sure to round you up."

This was Joan taking leave of the "red cheeked nurse." The bandages had been removed from her hands; hands that showed the

wear of war work when put under cover, but which were now bleached out, and prettily smoothed; all but the heavy lines where there had been those cruel, deep scratches. They still showed the marks of battle.

"Not much to carry away," Joan remarked, as she accepted her single clean handkerchief. "This, what one calls 'travelling light,' suits me. After the war I am going to institute a reform in luggage. I have a whole lot of reforms waiting."

"Whatever else you do, don't take to cutting off your hair," objected the nurse. "You have no idea how hard it is for us when we go in as student nurses, not to be able to do our hair up as we please. First, it is combed back in a certain way. Then, as we become more trustworthy, we may wear it in a knot at the neck, but the knot must conform to regulations. After that we have to put the poor tresses on top, to agree with the cap—if we are privileged to wear the sacred cap. Now, I have always thought all that just nonsense invented by some crank, to break the spirit of otherwise good nursing material."

"But your own hair belies your word, nurse. It looks too pretty for anything crawling out at the edges of your cap. Whatever has been its training agreed with it," complimented Joan. "Just look at mine! Do you happen to know any war measure available in lieu of a

hair net? My hair thinks it has charge of affairs, and just dances around keeping up with the day's moods. Sometimes I think my 'bean,' as the boys say is a wireless, and my locks the danglers. But c'est le guerre! Otherwise we should worry! Here comes my guardian. Isn't it silly to be paroled in the custody of a military man?"

"I shouldn't say so if I were the prisoner of such a good-looking lieuty. I think your guard is well worth—obeying, Captain Mason," laughed the nurse. "But good-bye little girl," she added, "and I hope next time we meet it will be at the peace table. Don't think we do not appreciate the services of the Khaki Girls, because we are chary of praise. We know what you have done, all of you, and we also know what the boys think of your work. Good-bye! I have been frittering," she touched Joan's cheek and slipped away. These big women were big nurses in a big war. It seemed to Joan, at that moment, that the service of the nurses was past mere appreciation. It was in the class of genuine gratitude.

"All ready?" It was the cheery voice of Lieutenant Murry. Joan touched her cap, and with a word here and there as she passed out, and a very private word to the blind soldier to whom she had been privileged to read Joan left Hospital Number 16.

It was so good to be out in a car again. She

had only been "out of the game" a few days, really, but it seemed ages. The weather was clear and promising, and as she chatted with the lieutenant, they quickly covered the short distance between the hospital and Paris.

"I hope it won't be disappointing," she remarked. "After all, it may be of no importance. The papers may be merely a lot of boy's messages."

"We have all the time there is to translate such messages," replied Lieutenant Murry. "The important point is to meet up with them. Is this your bank?"

"Yes. Daddy was so particular with my letters of credit he pasted them all over. He had a feeling I might run short of pin money. As a matter of fact I have not seen a real working pin since I came over."

Passing through the long stone-lined corridors into the vaults, Lieutenant Murry continually greeted the men inside and outside the window and cages. Joan made up her mind that he knew a great many workers in that bank, but then, that was not strange, when his investigations must often bring him to the money centers. Joan had not risked carrying a key to the strong box. Instead, she had deposited that together with her bank book, arranging to call for it when she needed access to the box. Of course, such an arrangement would not have been necessary in peace times, but where would

motor girls have carried bank books or safety deposit keys? Where was there a safe spot in barracks, or any quarters when such places were ever the targets of the enemy?

The box was passed out to her, and she soon had it open. She flushed a little as some of her own treasures lay in sight on top, but just then the lieutenant was discreetly looking out of a window.

Finally she got to the little khaki bag, and a bundle of papers, tied as usual with a khaki cord, a shoe string! She left aside the two needed articles, locked the box, and returned it to the clerk.

"Here we are!" she announced to Lieutenant Murry. "Here is the—key to the strategic situation of all Europe," she joked.

"Can't tell," replied the intelligence man. "Little treasure bags have ever played important roles in the world's history."

"I am sure they are there," Joan remarked, referring to the wanted papers, "and my friend of the Motor Corps, Lieutenant Warde and I have inventoried them. We felt they might be of importance, and as we could never copy the documents we did the best we could to list them."

He took the little parcel from her hands. As she passed them over she experienced a thrill. She almost shuddered! She was giving up the missing boy's papers! She fully realized what

it might mean, but she also realized this was the proper course for her to pursue.

"I hope some day we may find the owner, and that even then I shall be able to give him back his treasure bag," she said fervently. "You may be sure it contains some photographs and some love notes, but I am giving you the bag intact."

"I understand," and he did not smile. There was that about Lottie's hero—he did not laugh at other people's troubles, and it must have been regarded as a "trouble" for one soldier to take over the "love affairs" of another.

"And here is my precious letter from the spy countess," exclaimed Joan, she had found that with the few other papers within the shoe string confines. "I am not sorry to part with it, if you guarantee to take its jinx along with it."

"My specialty is rounding up the jinx," said the lieutenant. "And a royal jinks beats a straight-flush. Wait until we call that little Countess Hilda. I shall just love to read her sentence. As the girls say: 'I am just crazy' about that sort of thing."

Joan saw the irony and determination hidden behind his frivolity. She knew the spy countess had made a great deal of trouble, and she hoped again she would be able to assist in capturing her. Joan had not forgotten the encounter for which she could thank that same countess, and

which had almost cost the motor girl her life.

"And where do we go from here? By the way, in your investigations, if you should unearth a saying to take the place of that, I should be very grateful if you should pass it on. That is ready for the pension lists surely?" said Joan.

"But still in line for service. I don't see how we could work war English without that phrase. Now, we go from here to just wherever you say Captain Mason."

"And am I really off invalid duty? May I go back to Windsor?"

"Dead sure. Did you thing I was going to lock you up for helping out the department? Why, I thought you knew that was a joke about parole?"

"Of course I thought—Oh, I am so glad to get out to Windsor again. I don't care what I thought," and her eyes sparkled, and her cheeks flushed.

"Well, this is a perfectly good little car, and I am driving it straight out to the Windsor, so Captain Mason, I think you will get what the fairies have been promising. I don't blame you for wanting to get back into the grind. I think a vacation would about turn my head."

"Don't you get tired of hunting things down all the time?"

"Not a bit. The best of it is we are always hunting down something new or different. We

seldom keep on one trail for any length of time. But there is one trail though— Well, I lost a kid brother some place in the mix up," he blurted out, "and I am always hoping to come across him."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said Joan sympathetically, "was he—wounded?"

"Don't know. Just—missing. Well, here we are. I can't accept your kind invitation to dine, lady," he was again imitating the dead and gone society act. "So sorry. May I call?" he helped her alight.

Then all the mock manners dissolved into a military salute as the girls dashed out of the barracks to greet Joan. Lottie did manage to bow to the lieutenant, but she was almost gasping. He was gone in a few moments. All Joan held of her important work was his promise to send for her as quickly as his chief should be able to report on the finding of the papers.

"Joan Mason. Where did you get our lieuty? Do you hear? I shan't call you captain or—anything else until you 'fess' up?"

It was Lottie, of course, who was "raving." Joan did not know what the girls were talking about, she had not heard from them anything about Lieutenant Murry. Finally, after all the girls had hugged her, and made that sort of fuss that only young girls know how to make, Joan managed to ask what Lottie meant by "her lieutenant." Valerie with much difficulty

succeeded in making herself heard, from her standing place on the new barrel of potatoes. Then Joan at length learned that her lieutenant from the Intelligence Department, was none other than he, whom Lottie and Valerie had carried in from the lines, after the battle of the week previous.

"An awful lot can happen in a week here," explained Valerie. "But we are not going to let you have our lieuty, Joan. You have had too much fun as it is. Here we had to stay at home and work like slaves, while you were entertaining all those lovely soldier boys in Number 16. Girls, I vote against any further privileges," and Valerie solemnly asked for "all in favor?"

"Oh, but tell us all about it, Joan do," begged many at once. Joan readily tried to comply. It seemed worth while being away now for the joy of "coming back home."

CHAPTER XVII

THE VANISHING DOUGHBOY

"JOHNIE, dear, if we do not keep our list of missing persons carefully checked up, I am afraid we shall lose them over again. I feel like chief of the bureau," said Valerie. It was the day after Joan's return.

"Well, this last is only designated as the 'kid brother.' We know his name must be Murry, but that's all. Of course, we have no way of hunting out individual lost brothers, but knowing names helps so much, when one keeps eyes and ears open. I'd love to do something for Lieutenant Murry, he was so kind to me."

This started Valerie.

"Oh Johnie, oh Johnie 'heavings' above!
Oh Johnie, oh Johnie, how you can love!
"If you can fight as you can love, then good-bye German-ee."

"Now Johnie, I am afraid I have my songs

mixed, but you know how it goes," Valerie floundered, "and Lottie has a sort of wish on that lieuty." Valerie thrust her hands deep into the pockets of her coveralls. "Joan, this is a great day—in the air, and I feel woozy things will happen. But whatever you do stick to me. I don't care about having you go to the Paris hospital for another spell. I tell you, those girls do not behave near so prettily now, as they did when we had a real captain. They made fudge out of the last spoonful of sugar. And I had to sit up all night to watch the cookie jar. Not that there were any cookies in it, but you know we have to have some place for our—shoestrings."

Joan laughed. "I wish Captain Seely were back. She told me the other day she expected to be released soon. Of course, I know everything is moving quickly, and any of us who can do things must try, but I can't say I love this playing at captain."

"Seems to me I have had as much of it as you have."

"Certainly you have, and that's right. Why should I have the advantage?"

"Because you got me in this. Don't you remember how you persuaded me to join the corps?"

"I remember how I ran my legs off in New York to get things arranged in time to suit you, dearie. As for persuading— Now Valley,

be a dear, and give out the orders. It hurts dreadfully to think of orders, when one has a scratch on the right hand thumb.

"But I have saved the biggest piece of news for your own tender ears," continued Joan. "Valerie, what do you think of daddy joining the colors? Yes siree! He is a dollar a year man stationed at Washington."

Valerie pulled Joan down beside her on a tree stump, while they both digested the wonderful news Nita had brought over.

"And that pretty little Nita is in, too," repeated Valerie, when the story had been told by Joan. "I did not know her very well. Only saw her a few times when I went to the office with you, but I must say, I thought then it was a pity to waste her talent, and cutie looks in front of a typewriter. She had all the manners of good vaudeville, without being the least conscious of it. She is the type born to make people laugh and be happy, at least momentarily. I am so glad she has enlisted her best talents. Really, Joan, I think that sort of talent more valuable than that which we may possibly claim."

"I think the show girls are wonderful. And how they travel around on those open wagons, and play in rain and shine. Fancy the band wagon Nita has being all tinned by a plumber! But we haven't found any way of making the players waterproof. All their rubber things

are little protection in a dashing rain. Heigh ho! Sorry we did not have a chance to take all the training in Virginia Reels Nita told me about. They give it in motor and canteen service now."

"I am sure Joan, you would not have given any of your precious time for training other than that which we had. It seems to me we are very well equipped for our stunt here."

"Oh, perhaps. But—well, I really did enjoy entertaining the men with my meager talents, while at the hospital. We have such a serious task always. But as you say, Valley, ours is the most important, certainly. One trip made in time to the hospital may save more than one life. That's well worth counting."

So the chums chatted and worked. Neither enjoyed the proxy office of captaincy, but each did her full duty, in directing the work according to orders from headquarters.

"We have to look over our Kiddie Corps today," said Joan. "I had a line to say Mirabelle is pining for us. Want's us to come out first chance we get. She said something about 'ruse de guerre' Lottie's synonym for that noisy rooster, you know. You remember every time the old black cock crowed Lottie called out Ruse de Guerre? Pity we had to cook our musical friend when we needed his company."

"He could jazz," reflected Valerie. "Only he chose such an untimely hour for his symphonies.

Can't afford music of that kind, when sleep is limited. But Johnie, when do we go out to the hut?"

"Oh to-day, surely, if we can. We will send three cars to the dressing station, and take two for the supply work. I wish Georgia Stevens could get back. Like as not she has been made a captain, too."

"Just her luck," agreed Valerie. "We certainly are not the proverbial climbers."

Valerie took charge of the ambulances, and Joan went on to the village work. The front had been comparatively quiet, and the trips from the dressing station were being made at regular intervals—so many calls morning and afternoon, and none at night.

The demand for city work, however, that of assisting in the increasing requests of headquarters, kept the corps in constant runs to Paris, and it was hard to say which was most important—to take the sick to embarkation, or to convey the wounded to hospital. Of course, both lines were well attended to, the only question being which corps should do which. The Windsor girls had made a reputation for such brilliant activity, that many big calls logically came to them, when they were already well checked up. However, the proverbial "will" worked well with the "way," and as yet no official call had been unanswered.

It was out on the road to the rebuilt village

that Joan met Louise. The child had evidently been watching for her car. Not fearing the motor in the least, the queer little creature in her American clothes—she looked very queer in them—ran out and waved wildly to the car as it approached.

"Captaine, Captaine," she called. "Ici, ici!"

Joan pulled up. "Why Louise," she replied in French. "Come, get in. What is the matter?"

"It is the monsieur," and instinctively Joan knew Louise was speaking of the Vanishing Doughboy. "He has sent the letter."

"For me? Who has it? Where is Mirabelle?" Joan was excited herself now.

"She has the letter. It came from a little boy. We did not see the post. Oh Captaine! we do not now see the post ever. It is only the letter," and Louise shook her head of tangled curls, and tried to make smooth the great big gingham dress that would roll up in billows around her like some grotesque masquerade costume.

Joan was pondering as they rode along. She scarcely dared hope the letter told of by Louise was really from the missing boy. Yet, who else would have written to the hut? Mirabelle heard the car. She was now outside waiting for Joan, her face beaming, and around her were as many of the little orphans as the good war mother

could control. They clung to her plentiful skirts, and gathered around like the proverbial chicks.

How glad she was to see Joan? And how she had wanted to tell her of all the wonderful things they had been doing! Why had she stayed so long away? It was the *blessès,* of a certainty, but then, did not the captain remember les enfants? And the letter came, Mirabelle was recounting, it came in the night from a little strange boy. He had come so far he could not tell who the man was who sent him or from where. The boy was now one of the children in the shelter, Mirabelle finished.

Then Mirabelle went to a hiding place behind the chimney. She fetched out the letter, and with it, even the pieces of wood that had been tied around the few written words, were all still safely inclosed in an improvised envelope. Mirabelle was emphatic in declaring she would not open the missive when she saw it was for Joan, that is, for the "Motor Girl." She knew Joan would come some day and she knew the letter was for her alone.

Splendid Mirabelle. Her training was to be relied upon surely. She was the servant who knew how to serve faithfully.

Joan opened the queerly pasted square very carefully. Written on paper ends torn from newspapers she found the words:

"Need you. Come to last trench open, left,

first dugout. Cedars twos and threes. Whistle. Secret."

"The boy, Andrè," as Joan looked up, Mirabelle asked, "Is he safe?"

"Oh yes, it is just that—I have to get back to the barracks. Tell the babies I shall come again, and bring them something nice. Tell Louise I am sorry to leave in a hurry, and Mirabelle, I am sorry indeed not to be able to look over all your nice work. I know how you have fixed up everything beautifully," Joan complimented. For the French woman was plainly disappointed at Joan's leaving so hurriedly.

But the Khaki Girl was soon back in her car and dashing out to Windsor with just one thought. "To get Valerie and find the boy in trouble."

CHAPTER XVIII

RUSE DE GUERRE

"OH Val, I am so excited. We must go at once. He may be starving."

"But Joan, we have to leave everything in order here for some time. We may be delayed—no telling what may happen."

"Oh, of course, Val. Lucky Georgia Stevens is coming in to-day. She will be able to run everything. What do you think can be the matter?"

"Impossible to guess. I think he means the last trenches left open after the advance. You know they use the German trenches when they follow so quickly. And 'secret' means we must go ourselves."

The "Invincibles" were reading again the strange message. "Need you," was very definite and easy to understand. Then the directions, go to last trench in rear of the advance. Next, "Cedars two and three." The girls pondered some time on this, finally decided it meant

they would know the spot by the camouflage of cedars in "twos and threes." That there was no signature did not worry the chums, for Joan had reason to remember that hand, although the present note was roughly scrawled with burnt matches.

It required two strips of the newspaper margin to carry the message, and the girls folded each very carefully in their preparation for the perilous trip.

"We can take along some supplies in the small car," Joan was suggesting, "and a lot of water. All the canteens that we can spare."

"Oh Joan, I fell queer about it," faltered Valerie. "Suppose we should be tricked. That word 'secret' means so much."

"Oh, I realize our chances, Valley. But I feel instinctively for some strange reason, that boy knows he can depend on our especial help. No use speculating why. Take our little guns and our pluck, and let us hurry and be on our way. Did you tell Lottie and Edna all about the Paris work?"

"Yes, they are getting ready to go now. They will also report to Captain Seely that we have been called for urgent work out to the lines. As we were to do ambulance there to-day that will allow us enough time, unless we are kidnapped."

"Unless!" echoed Joan disdainfully.

The very best training—and our girls had

that—would surely permit of some excitement under the circumstances. Each girl now vied with the other in choosing the most "important supplies" and "extras" to take out to the "last open trench, left," beyond the groups of cedars "twos and threes."

"We can go through the woods," Joan suggested. "Then, possibly, we shall not have to answer so many sentinels."

"I don't believe they will halt us now," said Valerie. "Seems to me they know us pretty well."

"And they are not anxious to make extra trouble for themselves, either. Too busy. That will help some. Have you plenty of gas?"

"Oceans, and lots of oil and lots of matches and all the other little things. I have a whole carton of cigarettes. The ones sent by the Red Cross."

"There goes a Salvation Army outfit. They are fitting up a new 'Doughnut Dive' as the boys say. My, how they do love those Salvation doughnuts?"

"Don't blame them. They are first-rate. I have lived on them for three meals. Joan, let's say a prayer."

They paused a moment, then they were ready. Old Marcell looked gloomy indeed, for with the supplies they had taken, almost depleting Marcell's closet, the old woman knew the girls were starting for some dangerous trip. She had of-

fered the "slickers" and extra blankets, but Joan declared they were not really going to establish a hut—only going off to answer a call to the last lines.

Finally, they were off. Risks were not new to Joan and Valerie, but in the present undertaking there was more than mere risk; all too well the young girls knew their own dangers. But that the service required this, that a stricken soldier some place was calling them—that was enough.

"I am so glad, Joan, you thought of the shovel and pick axe," remarked Valerie, as she recounted their supplies. "I have heard the boys say the only three things necessary in trench life are the shovel, pick axe and cigarettes."

"But they can't smoke much. You know a cigarette is like a white light to a plane."

"Oh, yes, but they smoke under cover always. Sometimes they dig holes and lay flat on the ground with the lighted 'cig' only burning in the hole. Yes, they say the spark of a cigarette can be seen up in the clouds like a light down a well. Of course, they always smoke when they dig in."

"Hope ours never answer the search of the enemy," said Joan fervently. "I can't stop wondering, can you, Val?"

"My biggest wonder is, if we will be able to find the boy. Now we are getting out. Watch for signals, and for anything."

Ambulances were dashing by. The Salvation Army wagon came trundling along. As it passed, the woman at front tossed a bundle into Joan's lap.

"Doughnuts! How splendid!" exclaimed the Motor Girl. If she knew our mission she would insist on coming along. However, we shall be glad to take the cookies. How thoughtful Mother B— always is."

"You said it," declared Valerie, using the slang much more expressive than elegant in bestowing one more of the many compliments, ever being heaped upon the Salvation Army Lassies.

"We must turn in," directed Joan. "I know the cuts through this forest. I wonder what Americans would call this? A jungle, perhaps. I often wonder why they call such trees forests?"

"But look at their density," Valerie reminded her companion, for now the girls were following a very narrow path, made through one of the numerous "forests" that blazed the trail of battles. True, the trees were all low and of pine or cedar, some hemlock, but there were none of the giant oaks we associate with the word "forest" in America.

Kilo after kilo was passed, each of which counted about five-eights of a mile, and presently the girls stopped to take "stock" of surroundings.

"I am sure there were trenches over to the right beyond that flock of streams. I remember the boys talking about the good water," Joan recounted.

"There's the wreck of a supply wagon, see it, over in the little clearance?" indicated Valerie. But what was one old wagon in that forest?

"We will keep away from possible camouflage," decided Joan. "That same innocent wreck might be—loaded."

"Good idea," agreed her companion. "Joan, aren't you—scarcy?"

"Can't hear anything. Not even birds. What is there to be afraid of?"

"But we seem so far away from the—earth!'

"It is pretty quiet. I should never want to go on a retreat in a French forest. I prefer a little church all alone on Broadway. Let us see if we can get any further with the car; if not, we have got to hike."

"And what about the stuff? We can't leave all that!"

"Don't know. We have got to find our boy first. Do you suppose it is time to whistle?"

"I should run if you dared make a sound, Joan. Honestly, I am just the least bit timid," and Valerie was edging very close to Joan.

"I don't mind admitting the same thing," said Joan, "but Val, dear, this is war. Let us

be happy while we can. Nothing but loneliness scaring us just now."

"We can't drive any further," declared Valerie, disconsolately. "I guess we shall have to whistle. Isn't that a dug-out over there?"

"We'll see." Joan brightened.

Rather reluctantly leaving their car, the girls looked cautiously about them, then started off in the direction of a small hillock. It must be confessed they tried to see in front of them, and at the back at the same time, for every stir of a leaf was alarming. They had not expected it would be so great a distance to the "last trench."

"However, do you suppose that child got out from this distance with the note," Valerie asked.

"Why, I have seen the children taken by the artillery out a long distance, almost to the lines," Joan explained. "I suppose our messenger was one who had been on that sort of excursion and he had to hurry back. He would know Mirabelle, of course. and our mystery boy would make sure of getting a message delivered in that way. Evidently the child could not have been depended upon to give a safe message to a military. Might hand it over to the other side."

"Joan, let's call!" Valerie was now almost trembling.

"Wait until we are sure there are no snipers

about. Val, I think we should be sure the trench is in sight before we give the alarm."

Here and there the torn-up earth—shell holes, made dug-outs that had never been used, save, perhaps, by the victims of the shells. It was a perilous tramp the girls had undertaken, the more dangerous since they had been compelled to abandon the car. But it was not noise of battle that was disconcerting now—instead, it was the dead silence. Even a gun or two would have been a relief, but it was all so silent!

"We must be getting away from war itself," said Valerie finally. "Joan, could we have lost the trail?"

"No, Valley dear. I feel, very soon, we shall be in sight of something, and there must be a line of trenches. Keep up your courage. It is early, and we still have plenty of daylight."

"But how can we tell we are following the right path?"

"There is no other way to the left, and our directions plainly said 'left.' Either side we would strike the farms."

"Well, I am glad I had time to learn a few prayers in my girlhood," said Valerie attempting to be happy. "I need them right now, and am not in an original mood."

"Keep your hand on your pistol pocket, and your mind on heaven, is a good motto," said Joan. "I don't see what folks do who do not have faith. I should fall down and evaporate."

"Faith certainly is supporting. But here, Joan, look! There's surely a dug-out. I saw it move."

"We will have to take a chance. Pray there isn't a Boche under it."

The familiar little patch of earth that moved surely was the trap door of a dug-out. Making certain of this, both girls whistled softly.

CHAPTER XIX

THE PRISONER IN THE DUGOUT

FOLLOWED a moment of suspense, then there came a sound. Yes, it was a low, soft whistle.

"Oh Joan," Valerie clung to the younger girl.

"Hark!" Joan was almost on her tip-toes.

"It came from there," indicating the broken spot of earth.

"Yes, that's a dug-out. Be careful."

The loose spot of ground, covered with brush, rose. Yes, a hand came out then, and the door was carried up.

"Oh, the boy!" Both girls could have dropped down from sheer relief. But being Motor Girls they did nothing of the kind. They advanced.

"Oh, his face," whispered Joan. "Isn't it ghastly?"

"But he can smile. Hurry! Let us get to

him. I am afraid something may come along from the air Joan, hurry!"

It took but a few moments to reach the dug-out. By that time the boy had crawled out, and was waiting for them. Yes, it was their boy, as they had called him. How different the greeting would have been if only they knew what it all meant, if they could only be sure. But they must wait.

Quite as if they had just dropped in from headquarters the two Khaki Girls advanced. We may as well admit Valerie had her hand on her pistol. But the wan, haggard face beckoned, and presently all their misgivings vanished.

"Wonderful you got here," he said with panting breath. "I knew I could count on you."

"Do you need anything? We have water and food," offered Joan quickly, noting his weakness.

"No, I am not starving, though I suppose I look it. What I am pining away for is a chance to get this message over. All I expect you girls to do is to get it out to the road, and there wait for a courier. I am sure one must be along today. This blessed leg went back on me, and I have not been able to even crawl to the road. I can just get in and out of the hole."

"Oh what a shame!" Valerie exclaimed. "And to think we could not have known! Couldn't you have sent word in any way?"

"That little fellow who came along after the artillery, and then cried his way back, was my first chance. He would not promise to go to any of the men, because they had made him promise to go straight back to his diggings. But when I asked him if he knew the stone hut where Mirabelle lived, he was willing to take the message to her. But now I have to ask you to hurry with the rest of the work. This much has been successful, under great difficulties to you, for I realize I am in an out of the way place. But I knew this was the direction some of our advance patrol would come so I made for it, but I got here too late. Then I found the leg would not even let me crawl. Never saw such an old leg," and he put his hand out to the offending member with nothing like a caress.

"We can't take up the message until we are sure you are all right. Even if you are only here a few hours longer, I am sure we can make you more comfortable than you are at present," insisted Joan. "Going back will not be like coming out, and I am going right back to the car, and get the things we stocked up with."

"Yes," agreed Valerie, "we can make that in less than fifteen minutes, and then we will be off on the courier mission. Is there anything special you need?"

"I wish you would forget me for just this once," and he smiled to recall how they had previously "remembered him" in their care at

the hut. "You see, girls, this means so much—perhaps more than even I can estimate, and if you should be too late——"

"We won't! I suppose you could drink clean water," suggested Joan, noting a tin cup at a dirty pool, the hole having been made in the ground by a shell. The daily rain had filled the hollow, and it was evident that was serving as the boy's drinking supply.

"Yes, I would take one—on you," he said, with what good nature he could summon. But it was obvious he wanted the girls to run for the first courier to be met going to the lines.

As Joan had insisted, they ran off, and it was not difficult to get to the car and back again, now that the way was familiar, so, fortified with all the strength that had rushed to the girls immediately upon their success in finding the boy, they dashed across the woodlands, and reaching the car, they unbuttoned their skirts, and emptied into the khaki aprons what they could carry of the supplies. The canteens were strapped across their shoulders, and the cigarettes stored under their caps.

"Too bad we can't trust the car to come further in, but it is too rough, and we can not run the risk of a break-down," Valerie was saying. "Joan, did you ever see such a forlorn—boy?"

"Living in that cellar with a dead leg. No wonder. But Valley, we will get him out and back to the hospital. Didn't we always say he

was true blue? Suppose we had doubted him?"

"We couldn't. Run along, I'm loaded up. You are dropping a can of 'Willie.' This stuff will do him as long as he has to stay out here, but I hope he will consent now—to come from under cover."

"I hope so. But we can't question him just yet." Joan said. "Suppose we don't meet a runner in time?" They were hurrying through the woodlands and were back to the dug-out in less time than Joan had promised. They piled the eatables on a big, flat stone.

At the sight of their store the boy's face, for a moment, lost its stare of intense anxiety.

"Fine," he said. "How did you know I was going to open up a division supply?"

"We robbed the barracks," admitted Joan, "but they don't have to live alone, in an old dug-out. I hope you will agree to come back with us? We will give you a real party if you come!"

"Gladly, when the work is done. But I have to see it through. It's my job." He held a folded margin of newspaper out to Joan. "This scrawl is the life and death line," he said gravely. "If that can get to the advance patrol before they reach the line indicated, we may win, if not, we are sure to lose." He unfolded the slip and handed it to Joan.

She took it, then glanced at the message. It was in code. She looked back at him for an explanation.

"It is in code, as you see, but that does not mean that I want to hide its contents from you," he hurried to explain. "We have to stick to that until the point is reached. If that slip fell into —enemy hands (and it might easily along here), all our work would be in vain. It is simply a direction I am sending to the advance patrol, and a warning. I got the tip from—well, from a lady," and he almost sneered in using the last word.

Both Joan and Valerie involuntarily exclaimed, "The Countess!" They had not meant to speak so loud, but surprise mastered them. The soldier started as they uttered that word "Countess."

Then he said:

"All our lady friends or enemies call themselves countesses, or some other bunk thing to cover a disgraceful name, I suppose. But wait till we sum up," he threatened. "Then they will get theirs!"

"We, of course, still believe absolutely in your hidden mission," Joan assured him. "And we are willing to undertake this task on your word. Is there any easier way of reaching the road than by the way we came in?"

"I suppose you came by the wagon path. Yes, there is a shorter cut. You can easily find it, for I have been crawling over the soft grass, and have so disfigured the landscape along that way," indicating the most open stretch. "It is

very marshy. You can run your car almost over the brush, and it will lay down at your bidding. Now, young ladies," and he drew himself up by the aid of a home-made crutch, and stood very gravely facing them. "The matter I am entrusting to your discretion is one, the real value of which even I cannot forecast. I can only tell you this. I was sent out by my commanding officer to carry through a piece of strategy. Thus far, I have been blocked at almost every point, but one trick favored me, and I now begin to see my way clearly through, if our plans do not fail. I have told you a woman helped. She did, but not intentionally. But the most difficult part of the whole transaction is still to be accomplished. When I found I could not personally get through these woods, and catch the runner who was to meet me, at a time and place prearranged, I almost lost hope. But now here you are, all ready to help me out, and I breathe easier. Don't worry about me. I shall be here when you return. But first get that scribble to the first runner going front. He will have to do his best to get it to the advance patrol in time. We have not a spare second."

Eager to undertake the mission, yet loathe to leave the helpless boy again, the girls bravely turned their backs on the cedar-covered dugout.

"Good-bye and God speed us?" asked Joan.

To which he gave the requested reverential salute.

"When was the message due?" asked Valerie, anxiously.

"It must be within reach of the battalion major before they attempt to take M— The order is to go out to-morrow. The barrage will then shift. The white flag from a church steeple is not to be regarded. That would mean disaster." His face again took on the gray look. "Don't use any disguise in going along," he warned. "You know a woman in disguise is sure to be shot down. If you have to force your way past sentinels, do so on your merits. They will possibly give the road to the Motor Girls. If they knew you, as I do they would—give you more than that!"

It was a weak attempt at a sally, but its very weakness showed the girls how desperate the boy was. He could hardly speak to them, so anxious was he to see them start.

Joan tied the precious piece of paper in her handkerchief and pinned it inside her blouse. "If anything happens to me, Valerie," she said, "you carry on."

And so they were off.

CHAPTER XX

DESPERATE STRAITS

"WE can't make it! We will have to—hike!"

This was the cry that Joan gave way to when, after too much precious time spent in trying to drive their car out of the woodland, the girls at last realized they would have to go by foot, if they were to reach the road in time to overtake the evening courier.

Valiantly they trudged along, scarcely speaking. The great shell holes that vied with the hugh rocks in making their road rougher, were like monuments or goals passed by, as the girls left them behind, and counted those ahead. Never had the way seemed so impassable. Perhaps they had lost sight of the tramped down pathway, or perhaps their feet were rebelling. Certainly shoes felt like lead and khaki was weighed from head to foot.

"Here's a spring. Let's stop long enough to

gulp," suggested Joan. "We will make better speed if we keep our whistles wet up."

Dropping down on knees, and brushing back with their hands the leaves fallen into the spring, both girls drank gratefully.

"We're on our way," Joan called finally, as if that helped to cover the ground.

They had gone but a few paces when they stopped again. Both had heard a welcome sound. The whirr of a motorcycle surely!

"Shout!" suggested Joan. And they both shouted at the top of their lungs, first in French and then in English. "Help!" was the word they knew would carry most weight with a passerby. And help they continued to call for.

They ran out in spite of obstacles, and soon could see the streak of roadway.

At that instant there was heard the endless whirr of a racing motor.

"A—breakdown," gasped Joan. "Mercy! If the driver is hurt!"

A few more paces and they reached the road. Then they saw the car that had dashed into the brush and it was driverless!

"Oh my! And not a thing to help him with," moaned Joan. "I hope he has his kit filled."

It took a moment only to locate the hapless driver of the motor car, and from his position, it was plain he was quite helpless.

"Rotten luck!" he was growling in good Eng-

lish. "And something busted! The chain snarled up and tossed me. Bad bust?"

"Not your head anyway," insisted Joan. "It's only the chain I guess."

"But we have to use the cars to cover the ground. Ouch! knee's gone! I certainly took a header."

"One does at that speed," agreed Valerie. "Just stay still until we find out how great the damage is. We are in haste ourselves. You can count on us working double quick. We have a message for the advance patrol."

"Advance patrol left, can't be found. They have disappeared. Got swallowed up or something. This is my second trip to-day and no news." Then more prudently drawing back on his information, he asked "What's yours?"

In spite of his squirming and wincing he spoke quickly and with precision. But he did not attempt to stand.

"This," said Joan bluntly, holding out the newspaper message. "We promised to get that to the front in time to check an advance. We expected to send it by the first courier. Another coming?"

"Not a chance. How do you happen to be without cars?"

"We left ours over in the everglades," said Joan. "Let us look yours over while you are taking stock of your personal damage. We,

fortunately, know all about motorcycles. Our specialty."

It took all their strength to right the overturned car. Motorcycles are heavy articles when dumped in a gully. But the girls succeeded in getting this up finally. Valerie quickly got to the tool box, and Joan tested the parts. Meanwhile the driver was trying to get to his feet. The girls were both watching him surreptitiously. They saw he was injured, and their hearts sank. Was that message to be delayed again?

"Bunk!" he exclaimed by way of swearing. "Did you each see such luck? How many bones has a fellow to break in one leg? There are at least ten sticking out here. Or is it my hip? Not that I have any choice."

Boylike, he was trying to make light of his injuries, but a broken leg, or injured hip and a motorcycle would make a bad combination. Even if he were to ride in the side car the motion would be painful until the leg could be dressed. The girls realized this fully. All this time they had not been questioned further about the important message. They were glad of his discretion, as it appeared "the life or death line" could not now be sent by the injured courier.

"Perhaps I can help you?" Joan offered. "Of course, we know first aid."

"Oh, don't touch the thing. Blame these legs.

More legs in the army than brains, I'll say. But the message about the advance. We are sure stumped."

"Oh no, not quite," objected Joan. "You know we can run any and all kinds of cars, and this wheel seems perfectly all right. But about you?"

"Oh, if you fix up the Pullman just scoot along, and let me alone. You may meet someone, and again you may not. I'll be all right here, until help comes, and carries me back to ole Virginia," and he even tried to whistle. "I knew this A. M. I would meet a bargain in jinx, and here is friend jinx, all righty."

"Must have busted a cobweb or disturbed a grasshopper," he continued. "A flyer warned me to keep to the right of the blackberry bushes." He was a jolly chap enough, but his jokes were not solving the difficulty.

"We would hate to leave you here," ventured Valerie.

"Oh yes, you would. You just look like a couple of girls who would mind a little thing like that, when a sector may be in danger," he interrupted. "Just take my advice and beat it. I'll have a little nap here until a car comes along. Here are my dispatches and the orders. And say! you had better take my compass, too. Keep on all tracks to right until you reach the fork, then swerve left, and stick to that, then

go to right after you see the Blue Danube. It's a muddy little river without a given name so give it that," he finished.

"I'll drive," Joan insisted. "Val, you take the side car. We are of the Windsors, and our names are Mason and Warde," announced Joan by way of credentials.

"All names sound alike to me," he said. "The real game is to get the stuff across. Do you think you can make it? I'd go if I had to leave the leg in a sling, but I am afraid the job would suffer. Can't delay now."

For the first time he showed anxiety. Even the wincing and squirming had been permitted with a sprinkling of fun, but now he was serious. The girls told him something of their hopes of locating the advance.

"It's some rough traveling," he warned. "If I had a ghost of an idea any one would come by I'd hold you, but this is my second, and last trip to-night. Better be on your way. Hope you have better luck than I had."

The girls realized they must make haste but they hoped to make him easier before leaving. He promptly declined their aid, and would have no attention whatever.

"We are out of luck, Joan," said Valerie aside. "Seems to be ours to-day to encounter damaged legs. Hope our own hold out!"

"Better take precious care of them," added Joan. "Think we ought to leave something

white flying around him? Some air men might go over?"

"I have a panel—the oil cloth one I picked up in the woods. I will leave him that if he has none." She offered to the boy by the roadside the little strip of white oil cloth then used by the infantry to attract the attention of air men.

"All right," agreed the runner. "I'll keep it flying. But let me tell you, girls, if you can find any trace of those six boys who started out a few days ago to fix up for a new barrage you will be putting it over on the Boches.

"Have you guns?" he asked.

"Oh yes." They each indicated their pistol pockets "We brought them along—for company."

"Fire for signals, but don't tip Fritzie off. He would just love a little gun like that. Run along now and good luck. Bring back the patrol and we'll have you both cited."

He smiled to them, and again they started off. For a considerable distance they knew they could keep to the road, but it was after that they expected trouble. Again—c'est le guerre! How could they expect anything else but trouble in such active service!

CHAPTER XXI

A STRAY SHOT

IF their travels through the wilds that afternoon had seemed hazardous, the motorcycle journey now was far more perilous.

"Riding on a noise," as the girls expressed it, was by no means as safe as occupying a seat in a well-covered car or ambulance. But it was the overhead dangers that most disconcerted them. It was night coming on, and no soldier, friendly or otherwise, had as yet been sighted.

"And you don't feel any doubts as to the boy's work now?" questioned Valerie, when for a moment they rode smoothly through a strip of clearance.

"No, nor did I ever," affirmed Joan. "Still, we will have no absolute proof. This very message we carry may be a plot. How can we tell? But I don't feel we have to be sure of all the details. What we must do, plainly, is to get the matter where it can be made use of, even

against one who would be a traitor. You see in all this, we have kept to our lines, and taken no risks. Except the personal risks of our own lives, of course. But I mean we are now trying to get this to some man, who can reach the advance post before that unit attempts to take out a barrage in some dangerous point. We don't know that this paper will do all that, but we are getting the paper over to have it interpreted at least."

"I have been figuring it all that way too, Johnie. And what ever happens to us, I feel we have used common sense, along with patriotism. Small honor to those who dash on with suicidal intent."

"How many ends have been lost for times and then found again?" went on Joan "Yet, in such conditions, it is even marvelous that so many are eventually recovered. Think of the millions all rushing on, some falling and some getting strength to carry on a little further! The wonder of it all is how they check up so well eventually."

But the girls' chance to express opinions was of short duration. The ground was now getting spongy, and the wheels of their car were sinking deep into marsh. The twilight that was so lazily hanging on, dragged shadows along the woods, and left uncertain markings for them to follow.

"One more wail Joan," Valerie said re-

luctantly. "Do you think we might fall upon —snipers?"

"Mercy no," answered the other. "They have all been well chased out of here days ago. Just let us cover another kilo and we will signal."

That announcement plainly brought relief to the older girl, who, while she essayed to express most of the misgivings, was, nevertheless, quite as brave as Joan. Her's was to caution, and hold in check the younger girl's daring.

"There," exclaimed Joan, "we have made our kilo. Now let us try our guns."

Dismounting and making sure of the safe "storage" of their cycle, the motorist took from their pocket the trustworthy little pistols and together fired the code signal shots.

How sharp the crack sounded against the silence! It came back in an uncanny echo!

For a moment they waited—breathless. Then a sound—yes, an answering shot!

"American!" exclaimed both girls, whose trained ears could well distinguish the "tune" of a Springfield.

They waited again. The answering shot was plainly sent from some distance.

"Can't we fire again?" asked Valerie.

"Yes, once more," agreed Joan.

Again the wait. Longer! A moment more! But there was no answer this time.

Their hopes fell. Still they waited. It seemed

a long time, but a man might have to delay that length in preparing to answer. Perhaps he had no ammunition?

"Let's 'speak' again?" begged Valerie. But Joan hesitated. In fact she was crushing a fear she would not name. That reply might have come from an enemy! They knew perfectly well it was by no means impossible for a stray sniper to be hiding through the waste, left by the last battle lines.

But the chances were in favor of the American shot coming from an American gun fired by an American!

"Once more!" she told Valerie. "Make it the S. O. S."

It put life in the girls even to fire those shots. It broke the deadly uncertainty. Again the wait for an answer!

This time it came and carried with it the "crack" that read "Wait."

"We can't fire again after that?" said Joan. "There is some reason why it is safer to wait. That last crack meant just that. So we must follow those instructions. We know now how it feels to be under strict military orders!"

"Indeed we do. And it carries with it its own set of terrors," said Valerie. "What shall we do? Not wait here until dark?"

"Well, we can't tell yet. But we may move in the direction the answer came from. Be

sure the car is all right, then let us steal over towards that water. It may be the Blue Danube the courier told us about."

"I feel better just the same," confessed Valerie. "Even a shot is good company when you hear it, and don't get it."

"That's the way I feel. Got a lot of courage with these few cracks. Maybe we will meet our patrol. Let's hope."

"Let's!" rejoined Valerie.

Cautiously they felt their way to the clump of heavy woods, from whence had come the answering shots. Every step was taken as if the next might bring the crusaders within lines of hopes fulfilled. It did not seem much to ask that they meet a single soldier when millions were just ahead—facing death!

But the dark was coming now, and no chance even to strike a match. That would serve as a target for enemy sky men, the girls knew too well.

"Fortunate the shells do not fly," said Joan, stifling the fear that would well up now. "We don't have to do much ducking."

As if that were a signal, the whistle of a shell shrilled that very instant. Both girls dropped on their faces.

"Oh!" moaned Joan. "Valerie—I—am hit!"

"Joan! Joan!" cried the other. "My ankle, but only my ankle. It is only shrapnel, Joan.

Don't move—yet. Oh, speak to me! Are you much hurt!"

'I don't think so. But I can't move. Val keep down!"

Buried into the earth, as deeply as they could burrow, the girls lay in terror. Only a suppressed moan broke from Joan, while Valerie breathed hard and gasped painfully.

No second shell came. That stray shot must have been dropped by a passing enemy aeroplane looking for the ammunition dump.

In a few moments Valerie ventured to raise her head.

"Oh, Joan, darling," she murmured. "Tell me you are not—too much hurt!"

"I think it is my shoulder it is—so painful," replied Joan with much effort. "But, Val dear, be thankful it is not my head. Shoulders will mend."

"Now, I am going to fire for help!" insisted Valerie.

"Oh, no not for worlds!" Joan checked her. "That would give our position exactly to the airmen. No, Val dear. Just be patient for a little. We did not die that time, and so we may not—for a while yet at any rate. Can you drag off my blouse? I would be able to stir, at least, if this did not cut so. The shrapnel has taken the khaki in with it."

Valerie unbuttoned the other's blouse, and there, in that half-darkness, the girls struggled

with their injuries. Joan had been hit, with a sharp piece of the flying metal, and it had cut deep into her upper arm. When Valerie succeeded in freeing the clothing from the wound, her own injury paining cruelly all the while, they were finally able to look up and to listen.

"Valerie, how much are you hurt?" asked Joan, peering into the white face of her companion.

"I think it is just my ankle. But that will be bad if we have to make our way. Joan, don't you think we might fire?"

"Yes, in just a short time, Valley. Let the plane get away. It was going fast, we may be sure. Val, I still hope we may get our message over. It looks very dark but it must be early. Let us not give up!"

"Give up! Never! That attack simply riled me. It gave me spunk! I feel as if I could crawl to the front, as we know the men have done. Don't worry about me, Johnie. I am ready to fight, if I have got a 'busted' ankle. They gave us a signal ,and we will take it for a challenge. We will show them what Khaki Girls are made of!"

"Bravo!" called Joan against the pain of the wound. "Did they think they would set us whining?"

And if they did they "had missed their guess."

CHAPTER XXII

IN THE EVERGLADES

FIRED with that indomitable spirit of courage and determination to win, the wounded girls again pushed their way in the direction of the answering shots. It was still unsafe to shoot another signal, although the plane, responsible for their injuries, had undoubtedly left that territory without knowing what damage it had perpetrated.

"If we could only fire a few shots," Joan reflected, as she stumbled over a particularly unfriendly stone, "but I would not dare invite another shell. Besides, as they may be after the ammunition we might just give them the line on it."

"Of course," agreed Valerie. "But, Johnie, I have to sit down for a spell. I can't—manage —this ankle."

"Oh, Val! I am so sorry! We must not go further while you suffer so. You will have to

sit right here while I hunt some place, half way safe, to take shelter. The shoulder is not as bad as the ankle to 'hike' with."

"Both bad enough," objected Valerie. "But, as you say, I must give in, I am afraid." She dropped down with a sigh. There was no longer any possibility of hiding the fact that night was upon them, and Joan, making her chum as comfortable as possible on a flat stone, upon which she had spread a few leafy branches of a sapling, adjusted the sling of her own aching arm, and defiantly went forth in search of some shelter.

"I shan't go out of hearing," she promised Valerie. "But you know what fine caves we have found in such ground as this. I am hopeful I can locate one now."

"Joan, keep tapping one stone on another so I can trace you," begged Valerie. "I am not going to baby, but this is sort of scary."

"I shan't lose you," promised Joan. "I am not anxious to get lost myself, you know."

Followed a space of silence save for the "tap-tap-tap" of Joan's stones, answered by the same sort of signal from Valerie. It seemed a long time to the girls, brave though they were, but in reality only a few minutes elapsed before Joan gave the discovery signal; three long and three short taps with her stones.

Valerie sat up anxiously. Joan was coming back with all speed.

"Oh, I have it, Valley," she spoke as soon as she came within safe distance, "it is a little cave, so perfectly formed you would think it hand made. Let me help you," she insisted. "Here is another crutch I found. We will put up in the cave, if we have to, for the night."

"Oh! must we!" Valerie had dreaded that alternative. A night in a cave with the sprained ankle and injured shoulder!

Under a big hemlock was the natural shelter.

"Oh, what a wonderful cave!" exclaimed Valerie. "As you said, it is almost hand made."

"Yes, the Invisible Hand. But don't touch a thing sticking out! Wait, and when we are well under cover I can flash my light. You know the Boches have been here and it is part of their work to leave such comfort spots as this loaded. There! See that bayonet sticking from that corner. I'll bet there's gas back of that!"

"Oh Joan, what do you mean?"

"I heard the hospital boys tell how so many were gassed just by hanging their coats up in pretty caves. Back of the stones the enemy leaves a gas chamber, and when you touch something it opens. No, don't be afraid of stepping on a trap door to a chamber. They can't do it that way. But we will stay away from the walls just the same."

"Don't pick anything up either," again cautioned Joan. "They have a way of loading

fountain pens and pretty things. There's a real first aid kit behind that stump, and land knows we need that, but we can't touch it."

"I would not risk it either, although I know what a blessing a little first aid kit would be for both of us," agreed Valerie. "It seems strange to be within sight of help and yet not able to make use of it. They would, of course, put fire works under a kit. That's in line with their bombing hospitals."

"When we drag in that tree limb to sit on. Then we will know what is under us," said Joan. "I am glad I happened to have my hospital experience. It stands us in good stead now. We would never know about those gas dangers if the boys had not told us."

"May this experience be a blessing in disguise also," said Valerie. "But I don't see how it is getting us to the lines with the message."

"This is certainly a most unfortunate halt," replied Joan. "Yet it may be possible that the delay means something more than we can see just now. How did I know that my hospital stay was going to post us on the gas dangers?"

"Be careful of the arm, Johnie dear. I can drag the leg, but you can't pull with that arm, and not strike the shoulder. Let me take that end of the tree. It is heavier."

They pulled the old tree limb within the cave. Joan had set her flash on a perfectly smooth

bare spot in a corner, where there was no danger of possible outside reflection, nor yet any danger of that pressure opening up gas. It was risky work, but there was no way of escaping it. They were surely soldiers under fire, if only one shell had sent its shrapnel after them. They knew they would face other terrors now if they were not doubly cautious.

"Oh, it is so good to sit down even on a tree limb," Valerie exclaimed, and the two girls took what comfort they could derive from the good arm of Joan entwined about the shoulder of Valerie.

"We must listen, although I don't suppose we could drop to sleep," said Joan. "I don't feel as if I shall ever want to sleep again as long as I live, do you?"

"It is very terrifying," admitted Valerie. "And to think we have made so little progress!"

"Yet, we may be in time. The troops have not been so very active. We can easily judge that from the light firing. So they may not yet have made the important advance."

"Johnie dear, you were certainly on hand when the fairies scattered good natures," said her chum, hugging her closer. "How you can find philosophy in everything!"

"All good soldiers can. It is their stock in —war."

"Yes. Just suppose *they* should complain."

"Or decide the whole thing a failure! That's the way we have to 'carry on,' of course."

Light winds rustling the low trees and whimpering pines tried to send them messages of hope. But it was a lonely hour for our two brave Khaki Girls.

They might have dozed off. It had been very quiet for a long time. Then they both suddenly started up.

"Did you hear that, Joan!"

"Yes, hush!" she pressed her arms closer to Valerie.

"It was just outside. Like some one—humming."

"There! It's some one brushing through the thicket."

"I am glad it is almost daylight. What a night!"

"But Valley, we must move outside and see if we can locate the step. How is the ankle?"

"Awful still, but not so painful. That cold spring water helped a lot. Your poor arm, Joan."

"Never mind girl. It will all come out at the peace table. Hark, there's the step," she was whispering now, "it is just behind the big rock."

Almost breathless they made their way to the left of the cave, from which direction the movement of a faltering step could be heard.

"There he is," exclaimed Joan. "A marine!"

"Hel-lo," came a call. "What on earth——"

"Oh! Oh, thank goodness!" gasped Joan.

"Oh—help at last!" followed Valerie.

"Now don't collapse. I am only one man and there are two of you. But you do look—all in!" he said. "What's the answer?"

He was too astonished at their appearance to speak more seriously. They might have been nymphs, but he was a marine, and didn't believe in nymphs. The girls almost collapsed indeed. The long night's vigil coming to a sudden relief took their "props" from them. The fighting spirit had deserted them at the sight of the boy who could fight for them.

"We were injured with shrapnel," Joan managed to say. "Not seriously, but enough to prevent us carrying out our orders. We have a code message for the advance patrol. We are determined not to give up trying to get it across, no matter what our delays may be," she said defiantly. "We know the boys carry on in that spirit, and it is not our privilege to say when a thing can't or can be done. We have just got to keep on trying."

"Good stuff!" he exclaimed. "Let's see the code."

"We will have to use wisdom," Joan said with a touch of girlish embarrassment. "Of course, we must make sure you are the man we

are looking for. Do you know anything about that patrol?"

"Do I? You just bet I do. I am Georgie-Go-Get-'Em. I was picked for that patrol because of my ear for music. I can tell an Austrian 75 before it starts out, and I know where it will land before it has decided for itself. But when we fixed this—particular advance, Larry wanted to make a great stake. He had a plan to meet a Boche lady who wanted an 'errand' done in our lines, and on Larry's word (he has a great word that way) she was giving him our tip for the little favor. Of course Larry had her buffaloed, and we knew he would put the whole thing over first rate, but he never came back."

The girls exchanged significant glances. He had satisfied them of his genuineness, and their papers would surely convince him of their own. It was painful to wait even for these necessary formalities, so Joan hurried on.

"And you were—lost?" she prompted.

"You bet I was. I stayed behind too far. The other fellows went on, and when they were a kilo off, down comes a couple of snipes from a tree. They took all my stuff and left me looking West, but I had my other eye on the East. Trouble was I had not a thing to make a noise with, then I found a gun with two cartridges in. I fired them in answer to a call. I could have signalled one of our planes last night, but did

not have as much as a panel to show them. Nor a gun to fire." He was looking anxiously at Joan's belt. No doubt he wondered if the girls might have any means of signaling.

"We have pistols," said Joan. "It was our call you answered."

"You don't say! What luck. A plane will be along shortly. I can get them with a signal we all use. I can tell you I was just about to commit suicide by walking myself to death, or strangling on a good jolly. I couldn't think of another way of dying easily, and I never expected to get out of this wood. Seems to me I have been walking since I left New York."

"We have had some experience ourselves," said Valerie. "But now, seriously, do you think you can get this message—anywhere? We are so anxious. It may be that which you were expecting."

Joan was handing him the slips of newspaper margins. He almost grabbed them from her. He ran his eyes over the scrawl, then looked as if he wanted to speak, yet hesitated. The girls saw he was pleased—happy, ready to almost shout.

"Oh, this is—the real thing!" he finally exclaimed. "How on earth—but never mind telling me. Just let me spot a bird. Then we will try what we can do to make up for lost time. This may not be too late even yet."

"If we have only succeeded!" Joan could not help crying.

"I think you have," he faltered. He was plainly puzzled, but too discreet to show his real feelings.

Presently, while scanning the sky, he caught sight of a plane. He had the revolver in hand and was now signaling. He fired the shots in such a way as to show a line of flashes.

"They saw it!" he cried. "Now for the last act in the patrol tragedy. We will get them yet, or my name is not Get-'Em Georgie."

The girls, exhausted, were supporting each other. It was a strange sight even for a war picture, these two collapsing girls in their bedraggled khaki, clinging to each other, there in the breaking daylight, while a fagged marine, his uniform almost beyond recognition, was calmly signaling the passing battle plane.

"There!" exclaimed the scout. "See him turning? It will take about eight minutes now for him to get down from that height, but he is coming—that's the point!"

And in that intervening eight minutes the girls told some of their story and listened to as much of his.

Here again the courage of youth, and the strength of consecrated service worked the miracle of promised victory.

CHAPTER XXIII

INTO THE CLOUDS

"I THOUGHT the boys of our outfit were real stars," said the scout, "but they have nothing on you girls."

"We have only done our duty," Valerie insisted. Joan and the boy had made her comfortable on a long seat, while waiting for the plane to descend.

Like some great bird the plane landed on the rubber-tired wheels. The skid at the rear dragged over the ground, and then, as the propeller, which had been whirling about by the friction of the air, ceased revolving, the craft came to a stop, and the be-goggled pilot looked over the side of the leather-padded cockpit at those who were so anxiously waiting for him.

"Good luck," shouted the doughboy. "You've got room for a passenger! We have got to get to the right advance before they shift the barrage. I've been wandering for a whole day but perhaps we can make it yet."

"But the—girls?" questioned the airman.

"Oh, we can wait for aid," insisted Joan stoutly. "We have gone through the worst of it. Our greatest help now is to finish our—job. Can you get these messages over?"

"That's my job," declared the aviator. "But I have been scouring around for that lost patrol——"

"That's me," chimed in "Georgie." He had introduced himself to all hands under that caption.

"Just one little fellow! Where's the crowd?" asked the pilot.

"I hope they are no worse off than I am. Fact is, I waited for a tip. I got stuck—lost. A couple of snipes found me. But they left me in good company. I found these girls crawling to the lines like a couple of stars. They have the code, and they have the runner's letters. He got dumped out on the turnpike and the girls picked up his job, too."

In his boyish way he was quickly stating the girl's case, adding his own praise for their good work. The pilot looked on in bewilderment. He was wondering just then how his machine would accommodate three more passengers. Of course, being a battle plane, it would hold four including himself, but the speed and daring required him to hesitate about the girls.

"If the line moves over to that river it will mean a terrible loss," the scout added. This

was the only explanation he gave of the dangers that awaited the artillery, if word of that peril did not soon reach the front.

"Hop in," called the pilot. "I have got to be making it."

"Please go. We are all right. We have water and chocolate and the head of cabbage that George gave us. We won't starve on that until you send help. Please, please," begged Joan, almost like a child. "Don't delay another second."

The men looked at her in agreement. They could not fail to agree, that getting the word to the front, was the only question of the moment just then. As Joan had said, with water and the cabbage the girls could wait some hours longer, without much additional hardship.

"All right," sang out the scout. "This is luck—as far as it goes. Can we make it before five o'clock?"

"Hope so," answered the airman. Again the big machine ran along the earth until it gradually ascended.

"On its way at last!" breathed Valerie. "Joan, if, after all we help to save that offensive?"

"That was what the marine meant, I think. He was very cautious, of course. But now, at last, I feel we will succeed. It was a dark outlook, Valley dear."

"But you did not pretend to see anything

but the brilliant star of hope, Johnie! You are a perfectly good little captain. Years and wrinkles could not add to your choice qualities. Now, shall we go back into our cave?"

"Yes," agreed Joan gladly. "And do you think our courier has been picked up? Wasn't he the typical little pluck demonstrator?" she reflected.

"Oh, it seems to me hardships make for that sort of wonderful courage," said Valerie. "It would not be possible for men to stand such suffering and ignore it outside of a world's war."

"And our girls! I suppose they have given us up for gone."

"Likely. But I have strong hopes of seeing them soon now. Won't it be tiresome if they insist on putting us in the hospital?" mourned Joan.

"Oh, you forget, girlie. I have not had a try at that. It may be 'old stuff' to you, but I have never been in a military hospital, and I have not heard all about cave gas chambers, from perfectly fascinating, handsome, good-looking soldier boys."

"At any rate, I shall scout for cabbage," decided Joan. "Be good, and don't move that foot."

Spirits returned, the girls were ready for another day. The red sun was forcing its way through the haze and veils of night, these pass-

ing away reluctantly, as day came gracefully on.

Joan was back with greens that were not the regulation cabbage. She had also a canteen of fresh water.

"This is all right," she announced. "It is just as good as cabbage, and maybe better for the complexion."

"Sure you know?" quizzed Valerie. "One can be easily poisoned with those wild things."

"Oh, I know good greens. We have a farm, and a wildwoods out in Jersey. Besides we took lessons on French vegetation. Where were you when we went through that?"

"Oh, I was there, but still I am a bit scary about wild greens," admitted Valerie. "Joan, I suppose things will happen so quickly now, we will be swept off our feet—when the broom comes along."

"Wouldn't be surprised. Don't you think that spy lady tried to fool our mystery boy in some way?"

"Oh, surely, that's clear. But it is also clear that she did not succeed. However, we must not crow yet. We are not out of the woods," she said with literal, as well as proverbial truth.

Joan washed her greens, and spread their breakfast in front of them in mock style, arranging the big leaves in the "conventional."

"Sour," Valerie remarked. "But filling. These ought to make us real beauties."

"I am prescribing this tonic for your nerves!

Val, I noticed you shook when that boat landed," she was teasing. "But you did recover when the boys sailed off. Perhaps now they are nearing their objective," Joan turned seriously. "I cannot get my mind off that awful risk. Suppose they do not find the advance."

"Oh, George knew just how to locate them, but he could not follow on foot himself. He waited for the tip, you know, while they went on. When he tried to follow he was caught by the snipers as I understood him. Then when he tried again he had completely lost his bearings. But the airman can now follow in the path they had originally marked out. You see George knows the plans, and the airman can readily trace them."

"But he said they were lost?" objected Joan.

"Nevertheless, I took that to mean they were lost on their way, but they surely would try to get back to the original orders. It must be an awful responsibility to be picked for advance patrol."

"And to think that those six or eight men are able to locate the most advantageous point for the new barrage. I think the whole system is simply overwhelming."

"It is, surely," said Joan. "I wonder how long it will be before a return plane may come," she added. "I suppose they will take us back that way."

"Do you think so? I have always prayed

for a trip in a battle plane!" breathed Valeria.

"You are likely to have that prayer answered." Joan informed her, "for I hear a whirr this minute. Yes," she had jumped outside the cave. "Here he comes, Val, I am so excited. Shall we ask him to take us by the way of the dugout? Do you suppose we could pick up the boy?"

"How can we guess," replied Valerie, who had "crutched" herself outside with Joan. "My! how big they look! Looks room for the whole corps in their plane!"

Breathlessly they waited. The plane was aground now. The pilot called them to go to him. Joan took Valerie's arm and they soon covered the small space.

"Ready?" was all he said.

"Yes," they both answered as crisply. Then they climbed in and got the thrill of a ride in a battle plane.

In a few words the pilot had given them their orders, and being familiar with the great machines both girls showed they knew how to obey. Also that they realized the importance of every move made while in the plane.

Then losing their breath, catching it again and finally settling down to the wonderful action of the plane, they flew up into the clouds.

CHAPTER XXIV

A RED CROSS SMILE

IT may be well that conversation is impossible in air planes. Else the big thrill with its "enthralling" would be spoiled. Joan and Valerie both admitted, when they had a chance to admit anything, that a ride in an airplane was some relation to Finnegan's famous message. "Off again. On again. Away again, Finnegan," was the story the trip reminded the girls of.

"Only," said Joan to Valerie. "I had to breathe and breathe and then wonder if that was the right way to breathe!"

"About all I could do myself," confessed Valerie. "But wasn't it simply stupendous?"

"Here we are, Val," and Joan's voice sank. "That's a hospital."

They had landed in the big field, and within sight was a huge building. This the girls recognized as a hospital.

"How did you stand it?" asked the airman,

now turning and showing the first signs of being human. "Suffering much from the wounds?"

"Oh no," protested Joan. "And we don't want to go to a hospital."

"Had orders to get you here," he informed them. "The officers at the front would accept no substitute when they heard about you."

Joan wanted to ask what they had heard, but she knew such an inquiry would sound almost rude. Yet it did seem every one knew more about the mysteries of the three days' experience than did the girls themselves.

Tossing off the heaviest trapping, the airman took Valerie's arm gently.

"Yours is——"

"Just ankle," Valerie helped him out.

He turned to Joan. Her cheeks were aflame from the "high altitude," she would have declared, but it might have been surmised another factor was contributing to her enhanced beauty. She was being piloted to a hospital with that troublesome shoulder, and she wanted to do so many other things! How could anything wait longer? she was debating.

"But here we are up against a perfectly quiet and orderly military hospital," she said aside to Valerie. "When there's a boy in a dugout and another on the roadside, a whole corps of motor girls waiting some place and—all, and everything," she ended helplessly.

"What's t at about the runner on the roadside?" asked the aviator, as they neared the hospital entrance. "We don't let them stay very long in the open, you know," he finished with a half sly look at Valerie.

That was encouraging as far as it went, Joan was thinking. But what about the vanishing doughboy?

"You girls have been pulling a great stunt," remarked the airman again, and both wondered how he knew all that he seemed to be so familiar with.

"Oh, just—carrying out orders," Joan answered. "How did you know?"

"We airmen have a way of communicating with the little bird mother used to tell us about," he replied, and this evasion was their cue to avoid further questions along that line. Surely the army taught discretion, the girls had reason to remind themselves.

At the receiving room in the hospital the nurse appeared to have been expecting them. Joan and Valerie exchanged wondering glances again as they observed this.

"But we can't stay," insisted Joan, as the nurse led them to the examination room. "Really, when we are fixed up, we must be on our way."

The nurse merely smiled the Red Cross smile that doesn't wear off. And she had a very pretty type of smile, Valerie noticed.

"What a time you have had," exclaimed the superintendent, who had hurried to meet them in the examining room. Joan wondered why everything seemed to be waiting for them!

"Oh, it was rather a worry," said Valerie modestly. "Of course, our injuries were more hampering than dangerous."

"Bad enough," said the nurse, who had by this time given some stimulant to each, and was inspecting the wound on Joan's shoulder. But she could not risk tearing the khaki from it. She exchanged a questioning glance with the superintendent.

"We will have to take you into the operating room merely to get the wound clean," said the latter to Joan. "It is not that there is any danger, but that cloth went in very deep."

Joan sighed and her heart sank. Delay was all she could think of. Bother the old shoulder!

Valerie was more fortunate. Her injury could be dressed without the anesthetic Joan would require, to cover the moment when that cloth would be torn from the cut and bruised shoulder.

"We may as well be resigned, I suppose," said Joan. "But please do not keep us a moment longer than necessary."

"I promise," replied the nurse. Both girls wondered at the personal attention of the superintendent. How they ached to ask questions!

When Joan awoke she was in the soft old

"white cot." This time her face matched the surroundings. She had been on "the table," and they had put her to bed, in spite of all the promises.

"Where's Val?" she asked, as soon as she could find her queer voice.

"Giving that ankle a chance to get in place," replied the nurse, "but don't worry. You are both very fortunate. You will only have to remain quiet to-day unless we find any—shock."

"Not a chance," insisted Joan, "the only shock I could work up might develope as a consequence of this restriction. Can't we get out to Windsor?"

"How would you like Windsor to come in here to you?" asked the nurse. "As soon as I can trust you I am going to admit a caller."

Joan was not quite strong enough to become excited. The anesthetic still made her feel dull.

"I'm all right now," she said, however. "Do let me see a face from Windsor. It seems ages."

"All right," and the inevitable smoothing of the coverlets followed. "Just a moment." The door opened softly.

"You splendid girl!" exclaimed Captain Seely, who was at that moment ushered in. "Oh, Joan Mason!"

Her emotion was nothing to be ashamed of, and the big tears were actually stealing down her cheeks.

"We had almost given you up," she went on,

as Joan took the grasping hand, "But not one of the girls would really give up our two Invincibles. Little Joan! And to think you have done all this!"

"What?" asked Joan simply. "Did—we—get—the message over?"

"What you did will look well when—put in the official citation," prophesied the captain. "Captain Joan, was there any limit at all to the divisions you girls joined on your way front?"

"None," answered Joan, "So long as they were going our way."

The nurse was provokingly glaring at Captain Seely. That, of course, meant: "Time's Up."

"I just begged in for a single moment," said Captain, cautiously. "I had to have a look at you and hear your voice. Girl, you have done us proud!"

Then she went away and left Joan to wonder. What a big fuss everyone was making! Something wonderful must have happened.

"Can my friend sit up?" she asked the returning nurse.

"Oh yes, and so can you in a few hours. You have been having such a grand tour all over the earth you can't bear to lie still, even for a short time. This is not such a bad place to rest."

"Oh I appreciate that," Joan said with apol-

ogy in her voice. "But I have left others uncared for."

"Don't be sure," smiled back the nurse.

A wheel chair came smoothly through the corridor. It was Valerie, of course. Her eyes were fairly blazing with suppressed excitement.

"Can I talk to her?" she begged the nurse.

"Oh yes, moderately," the attendant agreed. There might have been a touch of merriment in her voice.

"Joan! Johnie, old dear!" exclaimed Valerie. "Did you hear——"

"No, I did not, and if I don't hear soon I shall crawl in my shell and die," declared the impatient Joan.

"Joan, it was too wonderful for words. I have heard enough in this single hour to keep me talking for the rest of my days."

"Well, does any one notice that I am not hearing anything?" again Joan persisted.

"Johnie, all the papers got—across!" said Valerie finally, "and the patrol was found—just in time."

Joan sighed so heavily Valerie leaned over the bed to make sure the telling had not been too much for the girl lying there.

"Oh Valley! But the boy in the cave!" she sighed finally. "It was he who really did it—all!"

"Not quite. But Joan. Don't do yourself

up. We want to be on hand for the 'big stunt.'" She pressed her cheek against the cold face of her chum. The girl rolling the chair was threatening to move along, but Joan clung to Valerie.

"I am all right, Valley. Can't they let me up?"

"They have promised to release you at five if you are good." She touched her cheek lightly again and the chair rolled away.

A sudden sense of collapse, that which the nurse had anticipated, overpowered her. She could not think now. The doughboy and the runner were there—and all the others. Oh, she must be going—to faint.

"That's all right!"

She knew the voice of the nurse. She must have fainted, or collapsed, or something.

"That was only the natural reaction," explained the nurse. "You are going to have your drink now, and then you will be all right, just as we promised."

"This won't hold me back?" again begged the anxious girl.

"Not one bit of it. You are coming along beautifully. The anesthetic always does that. Sort of a back tap after the fire. How do you feel now?"

"Woozy," admitted Joan.

"Of course. Just take this, and you will feel fit for another battle." She held a stimulating drink to Joan's lips.

"Valerie was more lucky," Joan was soon able to say.

"Not really, for an ankle takes longer to mend. You only feel now that it is bad to be held back, but you can carry your shoulder nicely in a sling, and get around beautifully in a very short time. Now I am going to try sitting up!"

After all it was passing quickly. These setbacks were natural, of course, but Joan was still impatient.

"If we find you do not get dizzy you will be allowed to get up in just one hour more," announced the nurse, and Joan decided she would not get dizzy unless the hospital was hit by a bomb!

She wanted so much to know what had happened, and how it had all turned out. There were so many loose ends left to their experience of the past few weeks.

CHAPTER XXV

AND IT CAME TO PASS

IT was only one day later. But what changes the world had seen. The Khaki Girls all of the Trusty Twenty, including Captain Mason and Lieutenant Warde had been taken out to the chateau where the two heroines were to spend some resting up time, and where the real wonders of their service were to be unfolded.

There was no shouting or wild clamoring among the girls of the corps as the session opened. Each had paid tribute to the returned "vets" and Captain Armstrong, of headquarters, had admonished all to remember what the girls had been through. She was the guest of honor.

Captain Seely assumed the responsibility of clearing up the mysteries still tangled in the minds of Joan and Valerie.

"Can you stand a surprise?" she asked, when

in the chateau drawing-room all were quietly assembled for revue.

Joan and Valerie both nodded.

"Bring in Lieutenant Murry," said Captain Seely.

The handsome lieutenant of the Intelligence, advanced, his face actually sparkling with joy.

"Captain Mason," he almost called. "You have found the kid brother!"

For a moment Joan did not understand. She repeated questioning, "The kid brother?"

"Yes, you know the one I told you I had lost! You found him for me. May I thank you?" he stepped forward and first kissed the hand of Joan, then gave the same homage to Valerie.

The girls were dumfounded. Neither ventured to speak. "You remember the boy I told you was the one person I could not run down? Well, you had him all safe and sound in your—hidden-away dugout."

"The boy in the dugout your brother!" exclaimed Joan.

"My little brother Larry. We found him by following the message you so bravely got over to the front. But I should have told you first that the code, so cruelly written on that newspaper margin was the key that saved the situation of our objective. One hour more and the advance patrol would have been in the mined field our friend Spy Countess was directing them

to. But she had not counted on the Khaki Girls and on my kid brother, Larry."

The pride in his voice was pardonable. It had been his own brother who, all those dreary days, had waited and served, by his intelligent and brave masterstrokes, driven each time against the sinister plans of the enemy.

"Where is he?" asked Joan, when she recovered from the surprise. "We never guessed his name might be Larry."

"Will the excitement be all right?" Lieutenant Murry asked the nurse, who in her white garb, marked a contrast to the khaki clad girls around her.

"Oh yes, I guess so. They are both model patients."

"They would be," said the lieutenant. "Then let us fetch Larry. He has been begging for a glimpse of his rescuers ever since we got him out of the woods."

"Oh," exclaimed Lottie, who had kept still away beyond expectation. "Isn't he handsome."

"Going back on me?" remarked the lieutenant who was just passing as Lottie made that remark to Edna.

And wasn't he handsome? Even Valerie and Joan were ready to answer that question, and their eyes were really untrained now for mere good looks. On the arm of his brother the lieutenant, the younger man came in the room. He

limped a little, but still walked like a soldier. What a difference new uniforms make? The invalids were both asking themselves.

"Here we are. All here!" said Lieutenant Murry who was acting as a master of ceremonies. "Larry, don't kiss the girls; Captain Seely won't have it!"

"We have outgrown the chaperoning stage," the younger man spoke up. "Even Captain Seely will admit we have proven our ability to serve without restrictions."

Captain Seely stepped forward. "I don't want to spoil this by introducing any formalities, but we have a testimonial to offer. Captain Joan Mason and Lieutenant Warde, you are to be recommended for bravery and service under fire, and our corps is honored to name you both as our members. The officials have obtained from me the material for this citation, and I am more proud than I can say to have this honor to-day. You have saved a whole sector by getting that message to the front lines. The Spy Countess who had plotted and planned to destroy our forces, has been captured within the Allied lines, and we leave her to her fate. But you brave girls and this equally brave boy (touching the arm of Larry) outwitted her. Had it not been for all that brilliant work we would not dare to count our loss to-day. Instead of which, as is the Fate of War, it is all turned to gain." Captain Seely then kissed

Joan and Valerie and the young man who had been teased by his big brother, gave a sly and significant wink in that direction.

"And the countess was captured?" asked Joan to make sure.

"Yes, we got her," explained Lieutenant Murry. "You, of course, recall the treasure bag. Well, that was all Larry's stuff. I knew it at once, but I had to keep the chief's counsel for the time. But when we obtained that clue it was not hard to follow the countess. But it was rather hard to get after Buddy."

"Yes, we called him the vanishing dough-boy," supplemented Valerie. "He was forever slipping away. But what about our courier? Who found him?"

"Oh you can't lose a courier," Larry chimed in. "He came in in my car, and almost chinned me to death about you girls. He may want to take you to the next canteen dance. He seemed keen on taking you somewhere to show you off. Great little chap Joe is."

"We must be sure we don't omit any details in this report," suggested Lieutenant Murry. "Captain Armstrong, here, helped me with the clerical work on our lost and found tank outfit."

"Following the clews unearthed in Larry's famous treasure bag, we were able to trump most of the tricks the countess planned to take with her hand. You see when the boys got out of that tank they were quite a ways behind of the rest

of their command, and some of them were injured. Then, along came the rescue squad of 'Friend Countess.' The tank boys were taken, but we have located them, and it will be only a question of days before we have them released."

"Are they imprisoned?" asked Valerie.

"Not officially. And it is not difficult for us to handle that situation now."

The girls breathed easier after this information. They all showed the effects of the excitement under which they had lived for the past few weeks, and Captain Seely gave a most welcome order:

"Command dismissed!"

The members, in passing by the two, threatened, promised and begged something of the girls. Each, naturally, wanted her own particular telling of the great story. Finally, Joan and Valerie were left and the doughboy waited with them.

"Do tell us all the little ends," entreated Joan. "What about the trick the countess had planned!"

"Oh, it was this way," he explained evidently glad to be able to tell his own story. "She came down in a big plane one day and while I was apart from the outfit I saw her land. She was disguised, of course, but had spoken to the pilot before she knew I was around. Then I saw my chance. I pretended to be a deserter. She fell

for it easily. So I began getting her information from her, pretending to give her the tips she was after. That was how I happened to be in the field. I had been injured, and she knew I could not move, thought I was safe until she would come back and get me. But you girls got me first," and he laughed at the recollection.

"But why were you hiding from your own friends?" asked Valerie.

"I had been sent out by my officer to obtain some information of the enemy. If I failed, it was understood I should not report failure, or show how I had been directed. This was done often so as not to embarrass the command. Well, I thought I had failed when along came the yellow-haired countess who loved to write letters and——"

"Make love to our boys," supplemented Valerie. "We know a lot about that lady."

"Well, she won't trouble us for a while now. She is safely stored away for the duration. But girls! I can't make myself believe you here and safe. I had my own misgivings about sending you out on that patrol."

"We made it, but we had some delays," spoke Joan, lightly. "But your treasure bag—are you going to forgive me for not burning it?" she asked.

"Forgive you! You very nicely gave it to my brother Ed, and sister's little ring went home to her this very day."

"And the—er—love letters—they were sister's, too, I suppose," joked Valerie.

Larry smiled, but did not answer. However, the smile was enough.

"It seems too good to be true," sighed Joan a little later.

"Peace will seem that way—when it comes," said Valerie, reverently.

When we meet our friends again it will be in the following volume of this series, to be called: "Khaki Girls in Victory; or, Home with the Heroes," and we may be quite sure they will well have borne the honors conferred on them now, with their citations and their fame proclaimed.

THE END